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Waiting At the Gates of Heaven

Editura Hoffman

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României
SMEDESCU, ANDREEA
Waiting at the Gates of Heaven / Andreea Smedescu. - Caracal : Editura Hoffman, 2017

ISBN 978-606-778-592-0

I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now...Come further up, come further in!

C.S. Lewis

I

The moment she stepped into the library I knew the reason she was there. She had come for him, for the man who was no longer there. I had expected her arrival, knowing she would one day want some answers. Answers that I couldn't provide her with....Answers that I was too afraid to utter aloud... What will I tell her? I kept asking myself, but no answer seemed right. She was expecting to hear the truth, albeit I myself couldn't dare to plunge into the unfathomable abyss that drew a line between my poor and human capacity to understand the world and the man who was once known as Uriah Reed. Nevertheless, I will have to say something. Meaningless words which she will assess and mark as fallacies. Yes, she will unmask me. She had an inquisitive mind. I knew that. Uriah Reed's diary had warned me about it, but nothing from what he wrote about her could have prepared me for the meeting with Miss Lalage Petrov.

I watched her surreptitiously as she was nervously looking around. And when she finally found me, for just one splitting second, her haughty gaze seemed to x-ray my inner self. I had never seen her before, and yet I couldn't have mistaken Miss Lalage for someone else. She was finally here. And she would come to me. And she did come. Her steps echoed through the room, and I saw her shadow lingering on the bookshelves as if it was searching for some trace of him.

He is not here. He will never be here, I whispered to it, and the hound-like shadow crept back, sadly following the woman in the green dress. Soon, she approached my desk.

"Excuse me, sir, I have been told that I can find you here. You are Parsiphal Gray, aren't you?"

Her voice softly trembled, yet the tone expressed a faint self-assuredness. Nevertheless, she was fighting hard not to betray her restlessness. The last thing she wanted was to burst into tears and cause an unpleasant scene. I knew how she felt. She needn't say it aloud. It was plainly written on her face.

"Yes, I am, Miss. Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, if you are kind enough. I will be much obliged to you, sir. But first, as we haven't been properly introduced, allow me to present myself. I am Lalage Petrov, a friend of Mr. Uriah Reed, and I would like to see his diary. I know that it has to be in your possession ever since Mr. Gabriel Archer returned from Palestine."

She had cut straight to the chase. I stiffened on the spot, staring at her in awe and horror as if she had just announced a calamity. For a very brief moment I couldn't say anything. I felt her beaming at me. The fire lurching in her dark pupils kept sending fiery darts into my benumbed body. She was watching me attentively, her eyes glued on my face. I coughed and straightened my back. I knew it would get to this. I have always known ever since I laid my hands on that dairy, but I have no choice. Uriah Reed would have wanted it like this.

"You don't know what you are asking me." I lowered my voice. "I can't show it to you, Miss Petrov. Even if I wanted, it is practically impossible. I apologize for making you come all the way for nothing, but your

request cannot be granted. The diary does no longer exist. I followed Uriah's instructions to the letter. He wanted it to be destroyed, and so I did. I trashed it to the fire and let it burn until only ashes were left."

She nervously pierced me with her dark eyes, and laughed. A few readers looked startled in our direction; some even frowned annoyed by that most peculiar laughter, so unnatural in a library where people were supposed to read in silence. Such a bitter laugh it was...maddening, tormenting, like a whip unleashed by the impotent fury of a chained goddess. I realized how uncomfortable she must have felt, standing there before me, but I had no choice. I knew I was hurting her; nevertheless, there was no other way.

"Please, Miss Petrov. I will have to ask you to leave the room, if you don't keep quiet."

The laugh ceased as though summoned back into an invisible Pandora box where it would lay dormant for ages to come. A heavy silence ensued. Miss Petrov raised her head high, straining her tears from falling down her cheek. I could see in her pupils the dawn of disappointment and remorse, but above all the fire of pride began to flicker, illuminating her from within.

"I apologize, Mr. Gray, although I know you are lying to me. I can see right through you. I don't find you any fault if you indeed have followed Uriah's words. Still, you mustn't expect me to shake your hand and be grateful for deceiving me. Despite Uriah's orders, I must confess that I am disappointed. I thought that at least I deserved the truth. That would have been an honourable act, Mr. Gray. There is no other freedom than the one truth provides, even if it hurts you to the bone, a feeling you can't possibly know, judging by how smooth things

went for you. There you are, occupying Uriah's desk, acting as if you were him, and telling me all this nonsense, although you didn't destroy it..."

"Yes, I did, miss."

Of course, I was lying. My voice tried not to quiver. She didn't say anything or she didn't hear. Neither was she moving. She stood there, in front of my desk, numbed and frozen, and yet her dark eyes were burning. It was as if her entire life had gathered in the turbulent void of her beautiful gaze. She was beautiful, exactly like Uriah had described her. Beautiful and proud, like an unknown bird of exquisite plumage... And this proud woman had come to see me, had listened to my words, and she rejected my falsehood. Her disbelief was plainly written on her face. Although I wished it not, I was causing her unendurable pain, and all because of a stupid diary left behind by a man who had disappeared into thin air. She was grieving and she had come for the necessary and comforting closure, and now I was taking away from her one last hope, not of finding Uriah or deciding whether he was dead or alive, but of having something that once belonged to the man she loved. His diary... his writing... his entire soul was contained in the words he had put down on paper. Who was I to lie to her, to tell her she can't have these paper remnants of a lost love? Heavens, this is unbearable... I don't want to play the villain. There is only one way out. I have to cut this meeting short.

"Miss Petrov, I am very sorry. I wish we had met in other circumstances... I can't be of service to you. If there's anything else I can do for you, Miss..."

Her lips curled into a mocking smile. She looked more beautiful, and yet more distant, inaccessible to men of flesh and blood. And yet, she was standing there in all

her proud beauty, hurtling into my face her sorrowful spite.

"I also wish we had met when Uriah was still here. Maybe then, I would have found you more agreeable and friendlier."

"I repeat, Miss Petrov, if I can be of any service to you..."

"No, thank you. I have already wasted too much of your precious moments."

"No, Miss, don't put it like that!"

She seemed not to hear me.

"And I am aware of the fact that time is for a librarian an oasis dedicated to reading and perusing the soul of all the readers who step across the threshold of the library. Don't try to contradict me. I once knew a librarian. He was like a living book one could easily get lost into. I know I did. I met him and I was fascinated by him, and if I've come to you today is because I still believe. I believe there is a possibility of him being alive. He could be somewhere out in this world, perhaps an inch away from me. Maybe his diary concealed a hidden clue, maybe...I will never know now. It has all perished into the flames, just as you said. Like the Library of Alexandria, the content of the diary is lost for the world, or at least for me. Well, there's nothing more to say. I should leave now and let you be. Thank you for your time, sir, and have a nice day!"

"A nice day to you, too, Miss."

I bowed my head and watch her go. Miss Lalage Petrov seemed to glide on the marble floor as if she were a blade of grass swaying in the wind. Like the reed of Blaise Pascal, she was now fighting with the hostile universe that had taken her love away from her. Yet, she was determined to put a hell of a fight. I sighed wishing she

had stayed longer, wishing I could indeed have helped her. But my hands were tied and my lips sealed.

She was heading for the entrance when she suddenly stopped. She turned towards me. In the electric lights of the reading room, she seemed so pale, so out of this world, like a vision one sees only in dreams. Her ghastly look was imploring for an answer, and she looked so alone, so estranged. Helpless...like a bird fallen from the heights of a stormy sky...There were already people eyeing her from the corner of their eyes, but she saw no one. She had forgotten there were other people there, and even if she did notice them she probably wouldn't have cared. Crestfallen...That was the word that came into my mind. She was standing there, rooted on the spot, crestfallen, not moving, almost not breathing, as if a mysterious power had sucked all the life energy out of her. I could see all the colours of pain and sorrow spreading upon the canvas of her facial skin. Like a tragic figure of a fallen queen, her eyes were wandering from me to the lofty bookshelves and back. Her lips were trembling, trying to let out a name, one that she would not utter aloud, and yet her soul was crying for justice. There was no solace for her on earth. A sorrowful Mona Lisa painted as a Pieta... I must do something. I left my desk and went towards her, fearing she would collapse.

"Are you okay, Miss Petrov?" I asked when I reached her.

She shrugged, trying to avoid my touch. Her arms were cold and numbed, and her lips trembled slowly as she requested me to leave her alone.

"It is nothing wrong with me", she lied, "I was on my way out when the thought came to my mind that I could borrow a book to read at home. Perhaps the same

book he last read...That is why I turned back. But then I have so many books at home that I didn't get the chance to read...I should first start with them. Well, farewell, sir, I don't know why I am still standing here. I don't know. Suddenly it feels so cold... and I am shivering because I am so cold. I have never got used to low temperatures and it's chilly in here, almost like in a mausoleum. Don't you worry! I will feel better once I am out of here. The sun will warm my frozen heart, sir. Let go of my hand. I will leave now. Farewell, sir!"

Miss Petrov pushed me aside, and with feeble steps she headed again for the exit. She was clearly in a state of utter distress.

If I let her go like this, I will never forgive myself.

Suddenly, it ceased to matter what Uriah would have wanted me to do. If he truly loved her, he wouldn't want to hurt her.

No, I can't let her go like this. I simply can't.

"He wrote about you in his dairy," I yelled and my cry reverberated around the room. Everyone there was now staring at us. Even I was surprised by my own audacity. But my act stopped her from leaving the library, at least not before she heard what I wanted to tell her. I reached her and looked her in the eye.

The woman had frozen on the spot, forgetting to open the exit door, forgetting even to breathe. She turned to look round at the library's great room, at the readers who had curiously raised their heads, and then at me. She was checking whether she had actually heard me or her mind was playing tricks on her. But I was there and I had indeed uttered the words.

"What did he write about me, if I may know?"

Her voice was merely a whisper. I gave her the warmest smile I could have produced on my face. She

didn't smile back. Her entire body was tense, vibrating in expectation, like a tight rope waiting for the acrobat to step along it. She was waiting for a miracle, for something that would restore Uriah back to her.

"I know I shouldn't have read the diary", I began, lowering my voice so that only she could hear me, "but I was drawn to it. I wanted to find out more about the mysterious and strange man who had left me- an unknown individual - the testimony of his life. Thus, day by day, I was sucked into his existence, unable to extricate myself from it. He wrote about his career as a librarian, about his dreams that lead him on the quest of his life, and about you. From the very moment he saw you, Uriah Reed's life had changed. He fell in love and he loved you as he had loved his books; that is, to quote him, 'with a love as deep and profound as eternity itself'. You were his anchor, his guiding star, and the greatest love he had ever had. Whenever he was referring to you, his writing turned into a piece of art. He simply painted you in words. And he was right, Miss Petrov. You are as beautiful as he has depicted you. And how he loved you... Uriah Reed loved you as I never thought it would be possible for a man to love a woman. He said, Miss Petrov, that there was no end to love and that you would always be his blue bird."

The darkness of her eyes had been flooded in the liquid light of long suppressed tears. Beamingly, through a veil of now fully expressed emotions, she smiled.

"There is no end to love", she silently whispered. "There is no end, because real love has no end. It simply goes on...forever."

Lalage lowered her eyelids. One hot tear fell to the marble floor. I heard the sound of the tear flying down, like a firebird, out from the stormy hollows of her eyes.

And when it hit the ground, the splashing of all scattered hopes hit me hard, echoing in my soul. When she again spoke, I heard not only words, but the song of a blue bird forever flying, never stopping to rest, forever in the arms of the wind, so that the shadows of the earth always failed to catch her.

"I wish I could have read what he wrote. It is not that I don't believe you, but it would have been a comfort had I seen the shape of those words."

The sadness of her voice floated in the air, like a black cloth of mourning.

"I fear I was not his real anchor. Had I been that, he would have never strayed so far away from me. He might have loved me, but there were other things in this world that prevailed over his love for me. Yet, I accept and respect his heart's decisions. My only request is to see him for one last time. I need to hear his voice, to drown myself in his laughter. I am constantly searching traces of him, in the people I meet on the streets, in the newspapers and magazines. I wish I knew where he is, because I know he is not dead. I know it with all the fibers of my being. I know it when I lay my head at night on the pillow and when I awake the following day. I know that he is somewhere out, doing the same, even if we may be living in different time zones. But he is alive. I would have perished the moment his soul had left this world. Look at me! I am still here, aren't I? That means he must be out there, somewhere. I often hear him calling my name and I know I have to reach him, and I won't stop until I find him. I want to find him. I need to find him, if only to tell him that a blue bird cannot live without her flight, because flying in the arms of love is the eternal song of the entire happiness in this world."

She smiled to me sadly, patting me on my shoulder, like she was the one who was trying to comfort me.

“Tell me, Mr. Gray, if I don’t intrude too much. Are you in love with someone?”

Her question surprised me. It almost felt like we were two old friends who had met for a splitting second and now wanted to catch up with their lives.

“It’s okay, if you don’t want to answer”, she said. “It is none of my business whatsoever.”

“No, Miss Lalage. It’s just that the question has taken me by surprise. Yes, I am in love with a girl just as wonderful as you are and we are planning to marry soon.”

“Congratulations. I am glad for you. I had plans, too. Mine, unfortunately, didn’t come true. Well, before we part, Mr. Gray, let me give you a friendly advice. If you love the girl, never let her go. Even if life might separate you, please, find a way to get back to her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I surely hope so”, she said smiling again. “Thank you heartily, sir, for your kindness. I honestly thank you. Your confession has restored me to life.”

I let her go. Her hand pressed the door knob, and soon she was out in the street where I would never see her again. That was the first and the last time I met Lalage Petrov, but I would never forget her sorrowful joy of learning how much Uriah Reed had loved her. His blue bird, she was indeed his blue bird...

I went back to my desk followed by the inquisitive gaze of all the readers who were reading in the Lecture Room of Ex Libris.

Lower your eyes. What do you know about dreams?

Behind my furrowed brow, I judged them silently, weighing their soul in the scales of a harsh scrutiny.

What is life for you? There is more to life than meets the eye. You have all come here to read, expecting books to provide you with answers, as if literature was the solution, but it is not. A book cannot live for you, cannot breathe for you. You should be out there, prowling the streets, searching for the impossible. Walk the roads of today, search in the scrolls of concrete hidden symbols or simply traces left by another man, that mysterious other who has previously followed the same road. Dare to live, to fight... Like Uriah did... Life is the only book worth reading, and the best writer is the one who recreates life not how it is or how it should be, but how it is felt. After all, life is an emotion; and the deeper you analyse it, the more you know that reality is never what it seems and never how you would expect it to be. Reality is the devil's laughter, while imagination is God's blessing; nevertheless, one never gets the kiss of bliss without the bite of healthy laughter.

Nobody heard my inner cry. All the readers were busy, gazing dreamily over the same pages, or just flipping the pages, without paying too much attention. And I was there, with them, trapped in a lonely building, far away from the God of green pastures and rippling brooks. Time was slipping fast. The noon gave way to the evening and I was feeling lonelier than ever. I sat in my armchair, feeling the entire burden of the world lying heavily on my shoulders. Everything was uncertain, and I was groping in the dark for something to lean against. There was nothing to hold onto as if an abyss had opened before me. Miss Lalage Petrov had left, and now I was the one trembling in the coldness of a man's life. I blinked as if trying to awake from a dream.

What am I doing here? It shouldn't be me but Uriah Reed working in the library. And where is he now?

Is he dead? She said he couldn't be. She would have known. But then if he indeed was alive, where was he? Why has he abandoned his beautiful Lalage? He really loved her. I hadn't lied when I confessed having read the diary. I did read it and I saw inside the peculiar heart of one of the few original men I had known in my life. Uriah Reed sincerely and profoundly loved Lalage Petrov. He couldn't have turned his back on her. Only death could have divided them. He must have been forced to leave her. But what was the reason behind his decision? Was it something he had discovered in the mysterious regions of the distant country he ventured himself into? Can he possibly be dead or is he still alive? His diary ends abruptly, but Lalage said she knew for certain that he didn't leave this world, not without her soul feeling it. Still, I have serious doubts. Although, I wouldn't have entered into the diary's possession if Uriah had still been alive, there was something that kept telling me he had indeed become God's vessel on earth. Uriah Reed had seriously disturbed the mysterious powers which he should have better let unstirred from their sleep, even if he did it with a noble aim in his mind; that is to save mankind. He might even be caught in between, not being able to cross over the threshold to the other world, and that is why Lalage still feels with all her heart that he is not dead, and that is why I too believe, he is carrying on with his mission. Well, if I am alive and writing this; and somewhere in time, another person will be reading this too, it means Uriah has succeeded. I and Lalage could be right. Uriah Reed might not be completely dead, just caught between two worlds. Will I ever learn the truth?

**

I have always wanted to be a writer. It has been in me, this fever of playing with words, of breathing life into shapes of ink, and of losing myself in the maze of my fantasy. I used to walk on the streets and looked for people, real people of flesh and blood. There were so many of them, always in a hurry to get somewhere and never stopping to look at each other. But my senses were vigilant and sharp. I saw and heard living stories walking past me. Yes, living stories...stories in motion. I heard their whisper and saw forgotten memories, untold stories, and unlived dreams. My eyes touched the hidden skeletons. All around me there were stories of all shapes and colours. People walked with them, carrying everything bottled up inside. There were bearded stories, or baggy eyed ones on which booze had imprinted all the vapours of liquor. There were faces of people who stayed with me, lingering in the corners of my memory. If I closed my eyes and pressed the hands on my eyelids, thus blocking all the light from entering my pupils, I could still recall the outline of a human face. I saw broken hearted beggars dragging their life from day to day, waiting nothing and hoping nothing. Their entire life had gone to waste, had slipped between their fingers. Like Hemmingway's Santiago, they had gone out on the sea, dreaming to catch the big fish, but they caught none. And so they returned on the shores of civilization, broken warriors of a bygone age... I saw beautiful women with empty souls, or with indifferent looks upon their faces. Every night they prowled the streets, looking for love, hungry like lionesses. They never found love. Always trapped in the gutter, these Cinderellas never saw their prince coming. Finally, they gave up on waiting. Perhaps,

the prince had no more shoes for them or married the stepmother.

Life is a perpetual masquerade. But there is also substance under a faded masque. You just have to look deep and scratch the dirt that covers the truth. I looked, and then I saw real beauty and I heard its movements through time and space. There are people, whose soul reveals itself, erupting from within like a glowering light that is only spotted at night. My gallery of unique characters...Old people who seemed to have descended out of a Rembrandt painting, or young beautiful faces like freshly painted canvases...My fellow creatures...When I saw them I wanted to write their story, to guess their life as if I was a magician pulling their real self out of God's hat. And I wanted so badly to write, but sadly I wrote not. I never seem to have the time. Instead I became a librarian, and if it hadn't been for Uriah Reed I would have never written at all.

Now I am writing. It is nine o'clock in the evening. My fiancée had paid me a short visit. We ate together and I said nothing. We kissed and when our lips touched, I closed the dream inside me. We stopped kissing and I said nothing. She doesn't like to see me spending too much time with books. I guess she is a little bit jealous. Neither does she understand my passion for writing. When we meet we only kiss and make small talk. Like tonight...

She left and I wished her good night. She waved her hand and smiled happily, leaving me to myself. I am now alone. Sitting at my desk, in the comfort and solitude of my room, I am finally writing. This, my reader, it is a true story. It is not about a hero, a saint, or a glorious man who changed the course of history. No. It is about a courageous man who believed in the impossible. Firstly,

let's start with the beginning. Here is the narrative of the diary I got to have and which I thoroughly read. If my narrative skills lack literary craftsmanship, please forgive my blunders, for they are unwanted, and keep in mind the essence of a man's life.

Like any beginning, our story starts at dawn. When Uriah Reed arrived home from work, it was already morning. The sun was flickering in the obscure glass of the windowpanes as if it were a tallow candle which had been placed by some invisible hands on the sill of the sky. The streets were enveloped in a shower of rays and darkness, thus creating a peculiar beauty. The town of London appeared in the light of dawn like a halo of mist and fleeting clouds, whilst the Thames kept on beating the shores of immemorial times. But Uriah didn't notice the mysterious beauty of the fresh morning. He had other things on his mind, tremendous things whose mysterious discovery had filled him with awe and wonder. But let me tell you how he was led to a discovery that was about to change the entire course of his existence. It is my duty as a successor of the Ex Libris' late librarian.

On 6 October 2016, the day before our story begins, Uriah went to work as usually without even suspecting the change that was about to come in his life. He arrived at Ex Libris, the Central Library of London, at half past seven a.m. Neatly dressed, holding his suitcase by the iron handle, he stepped into the building. His office was located on the first floor, and he didn't take the elevator. He climbed the spiral staircase as he always did. He went into his office and began to analyse the new catalogue of books which had been placed on his desk. The first hours of the day had passed by unnoticed, without any significant event. However something happened in the

evening when our librarian was on the verge of leaving his working place. That mysterious “something” made him stay in the library. He didn’t leave the building and he didn’t go home. When all the librarians from all the library’s departments were heading home, Uriah was the only one who remained in the library. Even the janitor left to his cozy home and to his unemployed wife who looked after the kids. At least, he had someone to go to after a day’s work.

The security man arrived for his night shift. He locked himself in his booth downstairs to read a magazine and chew on his ham sandwich. If the janitor was a cheerful old chap, the latter was a quiet, middle-aged man who didn’t care about the library, least about its librarians. He is still working here, and his habits haven’t changed a bit. Even a thief could break into the library without even being spotted by the security man. Really, the only thing that he is actually guarding is his ham sandwich. The library’s director knows and tolerates this kind of behaviour, because Mr. Peaggish, the security man, is his distant cousin. An unfortunate liaison, but still it is a family tie. Of course, Mr. Peaggish is a silent and discreet man. He never talked to anyone; therefore, Uriah was never disturbed when he was doing extra working hours. Now, that night, like any other night, passed without any intercourse between the security man and the librarian. Uriah was on the third floor of the library, in the department of Ancient Literature. He was busy consulting an Egyptian scroll about royal ointments and mummy rituals. Like usually Uriah Reed, being the chief librarian of Ex Libris, was interested in every literary artifact or unique book he happened to come across. Being all alone, in the company of his books, Uriah didn’t expect

to be disturbed by anybody; especially since the library staff had left the building. He couldn't be more mistaken. A sudden noise came from behind the second row of the middle bookcase. A loud thud...It seemed as if something had fallen on the floor.

"Is there anyone there?"

Uriah asked loudly, but no answer came. The librarian slowly placed the Egyptian scroll on the desk, and went to see what had caused the noise. He trod silently, but firmly on the ground, heading towards the source of the sound. There, on the second row of bookshelves, a book was lying on the floor. Its covers were spread, like the wings of a bird. It had fallen on its back, and so the pages were still fluttering on the wind of their recent falling, inviting the eye to analyse their content. Uriah picked up the book and examined the open pages. His heart gave a wild throb.

"What can all this mean?" he thought gazing at the object that was now in his possession.

The book must have fallen from the shelf, but why had he not noticed it before? Until that night, he hadn't known about the book's existence. Someone must have recently placed it on the shelf. Then again, it couldn't have been brought by one of his colleagues. Any librarian had the duty to report any book or artifact to him, and no one told him anything. Even though the person, who had brought the book, might have forgotten to announce the chief librarian; Uriah couldn't start an investigation since there was no one in the room beside him, not even in the building. He had no answer to any of the questions that were now crossing his mind, but then again he resolved to think about it later.

The librarian returned to the desk where the Egyptian scroll had remained unfolded. Uriah ignored it

completely as his mind was now focused upon the recent discovery. Determined to spend the night absorbed in that strange book with shaggy covers that he had accidentally found, Uriah seated himself comfortably on the reader's chair.

A golden eagle appeared in an exquisite drawing on the front cover, hovering majestically over the title. *A Passage to the Origins of Species* by John Gos... Uriah had never heard of this author before. He made a quick note in his mind to Google him.

While he was perusing the sheets of the first chapter, the electric light was turned off by the security man. It was past ten o'clock in the night, and the lights were always extinguished two hours before midnight. A veil of darkness fell heavy over the silence of the Ancient Literature room. For a moment, Uriah felt as if he had gone back in time, where mysteries governed the truths of a man's life. He sighed and let a smile go on the wind of a distant past that he had only read about but never experienced. The librarian put his book on the reading desk and turned on the light of the table lamp. The yellow shower of rays fell over the pages, the desk, and over the silence of the room. Uriah could even hear the wooden planks of the floor breathing under the layer of dust.

The chair he was sitting on gave a sharp shriek, when he sank deeper in it, leaning his broad back against it. The light of the lamp enveloped him entirely. He was wearing reading glasses and that gave him a peculiar air. His grave and rough profile looked even paler in that dim yellow light. He was not a beautiful man, judging by the beauty standards of most people. Yet he was distinguishable. Tall, with thick eyebrows, and deep penetrating eyes, Uriah Reed would impress himself on

those he came across with. I have never met him in person but even in a photograph one could tell that Uriah was an appealing individual. Unfortunately, he was all alone. In fact, Uriah Reed had always been a lonely wolf. Not that he was complaining about his life-style. He enjoyed his books, the wooden shelves, and the heavy silence which filled the big halls of the library after everyone had left. Only in the silence of the written words, the books spoke to him, and the librarian craved for their knowledge. Ever since he began working as a librarian, which happened right after his own father who worked in the same library retired, Uriah had been a dedicated librarian. And he loved his job with the devotion of a husband for his wife, or with the passion of an urchin for his toys and games. He had been reading all his life, and his literary tastes were motley and quaint, from the Greek tragedies to the Elizabethan theatre, from the Sapphic poems to the Shakespearean sonnets, from epic poems to modern novels, from Russian literature to American best-sellers, and so on. Uriah had read himself to exhaustion. That is why no one wondered why he was selected to be the chief librarian, because there was no other librarian like Uriah Reed.

Even though he had no female companion in his life or loving relatives, he had his books and his hunger for literature. Yes, he was alone. Nevertheless, he found such delight in that pleasure of his heart and soul, i.e. reading, that he was never completely alone. When holding a book in his hands, smelling the dusty paper reed or just devouring it from one gaze, he was truly happy and often lost the track of time. It was as if he had stepped over the threshold of the invisible world of the imagination where everything was possible. He travelled in an

instant through time and space, always searching, always hungry for the unknown, for an explanation that would encompass all the mysteries of this life of men on earth. Every time he opened a book, reality disappeared before his eyes, perishing in the mist of old but not forgotten times. Endless rows of books had passed like gigantic billows of paper and dust over his life, and soon without even noticing it, a powder of gray tint spread over his hair. He was neither young nor old, neither dreamless nor soulless. Uriah had just turned 37 years old and his youth had passed like a melody played by a paper lute player. Following the same path of loneliness and distant ideals that others before him had undergone, our librarian grew to resemble Diogenes in his pursuit of a real man, and Don Quixote in his chivalrous creed. And soon he felt his soul old and longing to reach a home he couldn't yet tell where. *Hiraeth*...That is the word that sums everything... Go to a dictionary, and you will find an old Welsh noun, *hiraeth* which is defined as a homesickness for a place you can never return to, a place which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past.

Being too idealistic, Uriah Reed never married. The woman of his dreams remained forever enveloped in the mist of his imagination. She was the reality of his soul projected on the confining walls of a crueler reality; that is the reality of modern times where women like she-who-would-be-loved by Uriah remained a far away dream. At first, he searched for her in every woman he met along his way, but one day, out of the bloom he gave up and accepted his condition as a bachelor. Forgive me for my digression, dear reader, but in order to understand a person as original and outstanding as Uriah you have

to cross the maze of his existence. Allow me to confess to you some life details I have also found out from his dairy and from the people who used to know him.

He lived alone in a dainty mansion which was located at the outskirts of London. He had no living relatives, and his friends were few. Uriah disliked crowded neighbourhoods, and Zman Street was the ideal place since it was shun from the tumult of automobiles and especially from people's riots. The only companions he had were the silent books which awaited his arrival home from the library. To his books he returned home from work, and these faithful comrades would receive the master of the house with courtly glances, inviting his hand to take hold of their covers and disclose the secrets of the written pages. And to them, Uriah rushed to attend like a loving father attends his innocent infants.

Of course, it was a time when Uriah considered the idea of buying a dog, a pointer more precisely. It was his favourite breed of dogs as he once had a white pointer with pink nose and beady eyes when he was a child. Its name was Carpet. Yes, it was a silly name for a dog, but little Uriah loved to bury his face in the dog's silky fur. At that moment he felt invincible, as if he were lying on a magic carpet ready to fly towards the mystery of the blue sky. But that had been in his childhood, and now Carpet was no longer alive and he was no longer the careless boy. He was a grown-up with plenty of responsibilities and little time to spare. Thus, he abandoned the idea of buying another pet. The poor dog would have died of loneliness since his owner would have been all day locked in a library. And Uriah Reed chose to stick to his books, both from home as well as from the library. As soon as the library was closed, the librarian bade goodbye

to his other infants he couldn't take home, and returned to his dwelling. Of course, there were also nights when a new book had been purchased by the library, and so Uriah had to attend to the beloved guest. He would not leave the library until he finished reading the book. That was the mystery behind his every arrival in the morning from the library. And not a secret love affair that some gossipy neighbor might have suspected him of. In fact, to tell the sad truth, Uriah's heart had only been touched by the one and only love for books that not even time was able to efface. Reading was the fiercest passion his bachelor's heart had ever felt burning inside. Young ladies passed unnoticed before him, and he would not even lift a brow. Of course, he was also shy and felt awkward in the presence of the fair sex. In Jungian terms, this would have been explained as a mother complex; and indeed, Uriah grew up without the maternal figure a child needs. When his mother died in childbirth, due of a puerperal fever, Uriah's father took on him the burden of raising his son alone. Mr. James Reed didn't remarry. He kept saying that a woman like his beloved Lotte was a once in a lifetime event. Little Uriah only got to know Mrs. Lotte Reed from the pictures his father would show him. The beautiful woman always smiled and held James by the hand as if she was proud to be by his side.

"Do you miss her, daddy?" Uriah would ask.

James didn't answer. He just nodded and a silence as heavy as lead fell upon the two. Uriah asked no more questions, and the years rolled by, and Mrs. Lotte Reed remained just a memory, a photograph trapped in the dusty frame of the past. The little boy never knew a woman's love, and perhaps that explained why he always blushed and lowered his eyes when a woman was

addressing to him. Of course, he fought hard not to show it, and sometimes he would appear aloof and distant. But perhaps, he was just afraid not to be deceived, not to be forced to acknowledge that his feminine ideal was only a myth and an illusion. That would never happen with a book. He needed only to smell the fragrance of old or freshly printed pages to acknowledge inside his chest the signs of every reader's infatuation. At that moment, an impetus of sensations would rise in his soul, a roaring fire that rolled its peals of thunder upon the crest of his enchantment. And life would sweep him off his feet. Yes, real and vibrating life, because for Uriah fantasy was only another window to a different reality.

This is Uriah Reed, reader, as I have known him from childhood till his death. He was no better or worse than his fellows, but he had an inquisitive mind and a dreaming soul. He dreamt of the impossible just like his father. And perhaps, you too reader, are a dreamer. I know I am, and that is why I sympathize with Uriah the most. But however insane his dreams may seem to be, he believed in them. He believed with a force that would even upturn the highest mountains. And this very quality of him, his gullibility if I am permitted to add, led him to the adventure of his life. How do I know about this adventure? Very simple, as you have already figured it out, I am substituting Uriah Reed. My name is Mr. Parsiphal Gray, and I am the new chief librarian of Ex Libris. Yes, my reader, I am the successor of Mr. Reed, and although I have never been acquainted with him personally there is no person in this world I wouldn't know better than old moody Uriah. Since he was his father's son till the day his soul went to Heaven, or at least somewhere, I have known him. I know his likes and dislikes, his deepest

thoughts and keenest sorrows, his overwhelming joys and his most secret dreams and hopes. I know him as if I was standing in front of a mirror looking to myself and X-raying my hidden self. How is this possible, I know you are wondering? Well, it is very possible when you are a librarian and you have at your disposal the files of all the people working in the library, moreover, when you come across someone's diary. I acknowledge the fact that if Uriah Reed's lawyer hadn't arrived in person, bringing to my office his diary, I would never have been interested in his story. But the lawyer did come. Mr. Bittman was grave and sulky, and he kept a polite attitude all through our acquaintance. He told me about Uriah's desire of passing on the legacy of his existence to the new librarian of Ex Libris. At first I was astounded and didn't know what to say but driven by curiosity, I accepted the diary and that very night, back at my home, I began reading the life of Uriah Reed. What I found in his confessions both dazzled me and left me speechless. For days, I felt benumbed and couldn't talk to anybody about it. What could I have said and to whom? All my colleagues, i.e. the other librarians, would have thought me insane. I had only started my job at Ex Libris and I was already entangled in its mysteries. Therefore, I thought of writing down myself the narrative of the diary. It would clear my mind and help me see things in a more logical perspective. But above all, writing Uriah Reed's story would be like fulfilling my own dream of becoming a writer. What an amazing sensation to behold the ontological scenery, the landscape of a man's life, and to follow his history, to feel like he felt and to think like he thought. It is an exhilarating experience, like you're riding the steppe and life's gale blows into your face, bringing closer the distant horizon of the oriental

skies. A writer and inventor of characters may resemble a puppeteer, handling the strings of his lifeless puppets, deciding for them, and pouring life into them as he pleases; but a writer of a man's life is never a puppeteer. He is only the shadow, the same shadow that fell when Hamlet soliloquized "To be or not to be? That is the question?" A writer of life will accompany his character along his journey, but never, under any circumstance, will he decide for him what path should he take. So let's not stray from the course of the events and return to the point where all started.

After having read at the reader's desk for about two hours, an interval during which his eyes had not left the pages for even a second; Uriah got up and taking the book with him, he headed towards his office which was located on the first floor. He climbed down the stairs in frenzy, hurrying to get back to his office. His mind felt dizzy and his heartbeats had quickened their pace. His chest was drumming, his ears were pounding; and when he reached his office, his hand fumbled in his pockets for the key. He opened the door without delay and quickly disappeared inside. Even if it was no need at all, as he didn't run the risk of being disturbed, he locked himself in his tiny study. Lighting the lamp from the desk, the light fell again over the covers of the book. This time the light was coming from another lamp, thus from a new perspective. It was the light fostered by the safe location of Uriah's personal office. Perhaps that is why he saw what he didn't notice before. In the lower right corner, the editor had engraved a thunder. It was blue and red at the same time. Water and fire... Heaven and hell... His fingers felt the texture of the engraving. It felt hard and cold. Uriah seated at his desk, trying to still his heart. He

turned off his phone lest none would disturb him and remained inside his office, clouded in secrecy and hard study. And the loneliness of the building was getting heavier than ever. Big Ben struck midnight. Its heavy bang resounded over the quiet city. Most people had surely fallen into a sweet slumber, but it was not the case of Uriah. He had forgotten what rest felt like.

Time was flapping its wings like a relentless eagle, hitting with its beak in the ribs of the building and trying to pluck man out. The eagle was hungry for Uriah, had come for him and only for him. At that moment, there was no one left in the building except the chief librarian and the security man. As I have said every employee had left the library hours ago, leaving the librarian alone. His colleagues never bade him good night or inquired about his health. They just assumed him to be there extra longer than the majority. Not even one of Mr. Reed's colleagues found his behaviour strange and no one asked questions. His colleagues were all accustomed with his staying overnight at work. So, Uriah could never be disturbed by any sudden knock on the office door. Only Time visited him, hovering like an eagle over his nights. He felt the shadow of the merciless bird of prey. He always felt it. And now the shadow of the eagle had fallen over the front cover of the book as well. The title was glowing, dipped in the light of the lamp, in the light of the twinkling stars which watched inside the office from behind the curtains. The eagle seemed to fly, to circle the room, and to cry for freedom. But time kept passing away, like a streamlet running endlessly over the rocky walls of a rugged mountain.

Uriah Reed readjusted the pair of glasses on his nose, and went on reading and taking notes. By studying

the mysterious book, the librarian discovered his own past. The face of his father, Mr. James Reed appeared before him, like a memento of bygone days and Uriah remembered. He remained in the library all night, and it was not until dawn, when Uriah's office opened its doors for the second time and the librarian slid outside unnoticed. The security man was heavily snoring in his cubicle. Some leftovers were laying in a mess around the plump figure of Mr. Peaggish, the snoring security man. Isn't it funny the manner a name reflects the soul of a person, or better said, in the case of our Mr. Peaggish, the name provided an accurately glimpse within. He looked and behaved like a pig, and the name became him smoothly.

Uriah didn't even bother to wake him up. He went to the back door, pressed his card on the digital panel, and he stepped over the threshold, leaving behind the silent walls of the library. A gust of fresh wind filled his lungs and Uriah breathed deeply. He was agitated and almost ran down the streets, not stopping even to draw his breath. His hair was uncombed and disheveled, and his eyes glared madly at every sign of life. He felt the imperious need of telling someone, be it an unknown passer-by or a familiar face that he might come across with, about the extraordinary thing that had happened to him. He was like a bubble of excitement waiting to explode in someone's ears. But he met no one except for stray dogs and cats, the former growling with suspicion at him while the latter scurried from his way. Uriah didn't slow down his pace. *Hiraeth...* The yearning had come back, coiling around his heart and pouring in it the poison of loss. He had to recover what his ancestors lost, what he had lost. Uriah Reed knew that he would never rest until he regained his Paradise.

You were right, father, he kept repeating in his mind, addressing himself to the memory of the late Mr. James Reed. All that time I thought you mad, and you were right. It was I who was a mad and blind person. Oh, father, can you forgive your son, your prodigal son who is now returning to faith and truth?

The October wind whipped the rustling leaves of the alley trees. Car tyres were screeching into the gravel, and the wind blew the sound to Uriah's ears. Feeble lights were starting to flicker in the window panes, a sure sign of life awakening in the cottages and blocks of flats Uriah was then passing by. Yet, no one appeared to greet the man whose soul was now trembling with anticipation. Uriah Reed was only accompanied by the shadow of the golden eagle, whose sharp pinions were wide spread, scratching the concrete walls of the tall buildings, forever hungry for a human touch. There were no people, just automatons driving silently to work, and still Uriah saw no living man. He kept calling his father, asking for his forgiveness, and no answer came. Stillness and noise, chaos and order... and the city swarm with people who had risen from slumber only to fall into another slumber, tougher than the night's dream. It was the mechanical slumber of civilization, the same slumber that had befallen Uriah until he was awakened by the eagle of universal consciousness.

Uriah quickened his pace, hurrying to get home. Once there, he would step inside his father's study and unlock the drawer of his desk. The manuscript would be there, covered in dust and oblivion. It had been waiting for a human touch ever since Mr. James Reed passed away, but Uriah had so far avoided any attempt of entering his father's study. He had been too afraid of the truth behind

the covers, a truth that his father wanted him to know and accept. But now the time had come to fulfill his duty as a son. He braced himself for that, knowing that the manuscript would guide him to the path he had always feared to follow.

When he arrived in front of his mansion, after pausing for a moment to draw his breath and steady his heartbeats, he fumbled for the keys in his pockets; then he unlocked the front door. The hinges gave a shriek cry, piercing the silence. The dark hall came into sight and the librarian entered and turned on the light. The big chandelier yawned with life, spreading the electric colours of its old soul. Another yellow light...only a different space...Uriah Reed also felt different, as if a sudden change had relocated his self and altered the fibers of his being. He was back at home and the day was just beginning. But something else had also sprung from the depths of the unknown. Uriah Reed was a completely changed man, other than he had been a day before. Thus on the morning of October 7th, 2016 a different Mr. Reed, and yet he still possessed the same physical features, had stepped over the threshold, into the mansion's central hall, quivering from head to foot in a state of utter agitation. That was so unlike him that even the books on the shelves seemed to shake with fear in their closed covers.

He climbed the stairs, passing by without noticing the portraits of his ancestors who looked at him from the confinement of the framed canvas. What storm had agitated the waters of his soul? What could have happened at the library that impressed him so much? But mostly what was the reason behind his action of leaving again his home right after his arrival? Because, yes, my reader, Uriah had only stopped to grab an old

manuscript from the upper drawer of his late father's home office and then he went out in a hurry. The same ancestors blinked mysteriously in the yellow light of the old chandelier, watching how the last heir of the Reed's family tradition flies into life as impetuously as the waters of the primordial deluge. It didn't matter he had gone a night without sleeping. There was no time for rest. It will come a time for rest, but not now, later. Now, he had to act. With the speed of a racing horse, he rushed out of the door, panting without breath, and almost running like a madman along the gloomy streets of a typical London morning. And yet it was nothing typical about that morning...In the distance the fiery chariot of the Sun appeared ominously. It was still harnessed in cloudy ropes, and yet the chariot kept mounting the summit of the city.

The Sun will finally rise.

II

It was a quarter past seven when Uriah found himself in front of a small cottage which was surrounded by an alley of linden trees. A patch of neatly mown grass stretched up to the pavement where an old car slept motionless. Built of red brick, the cottage had a dwarfish appearance, although its roof was tall and pointed. There, Uriah Reed's old friend, Mr. Gabriel Archer, another librarian of Ex Libris from the meta-narrative department, and noble comrade of his bachelorhood circle, lived alone with only an old aunt who attended to his needs. Hoping not to come across Mr. Archer's aunt, Uriah rang the doorbell with fury and impatience. The sound of the bell pierced the silence of the morning, and as if an ominous bird had landed upon the roof of the house, Mr. Gabriel Archer's dwelling seemed to have shaken from slumber.

Steps were heard scurrying for the door, and a moment later the knob of the handle was moved from the inside. Soon afterwards Mr. Archer's face peered into the dim morning light, his eyes squinting at his friend. He was still sleepy and grumpy for having been woken up from bed, and his disheveled red hair made him look like a human torch ready to burn whoever was standing in his way. Of course, Mr. Archer was really a decent man and Uriah's best friend, and thus he only mumbled a "What the hack are you doing here" welcome. Uriah didn't answer but his face was all aglow. Mr. Archer kept frowning

and he pulled tight the dressing gown around his plump body. Outside it felt chilly and he was dressed in a thin velvet gown, and in his bare feet he wore slippers. His wrinkled face didn't cease scowling at Uriah, obviously not so pleased by a so early social call. He was Uriah's senior, and being 12 years older, Mr. Gabriel Archer often treated his friend as if the latter were an inexperienced child who needed to be taught proper manners and thus, reminded of a man's natural common sense. Nevertheless, he was very fond of his friend, and he was always glad to have him around for a brief philosophical chat. Of course, provided it wasn't very early in the morning.

Uriah Reed understood his friend's feelings which were so obviously displayed in his morose countenance. But the sulky attitude of Mr. Archer didn't seem to deter Uriah, who without waiting to be invited in stepped across the threshold, almost pushing his way with his elbow since Gabriel was blocking the way. Mr. Archer blinked surprised by the audacity of Uriah. Gaping, with his jaws dropped, Gabriel Archer remained rooted on the threshold, his eyes frantically staring at the tall silhouette of the man he thought he knew. He was so amazed to witness that odd attitude, and moreover he was violently shaken by the feverish 'Eureka' yelled in his ear by his impetuous friend.

"I have found it, Gabriel! I have found what others have been searching for centuries. The place where the Garden of Eden is located, and there my friend lays buried the truth of all religions. It is the starting point of mankind, Gabriel, the dividing line between reality, as it used to be in its raw and primitive form, and myth. My friend, I feel that my heart is about to explode... Do you realize what this fact really means? And imagine that it

has been all the time before my very nose, defying me with its elusiveness and ethereal substance."

Flabbergasted, Mr. Archer's jaw dropped lower than it could be possible and his eyes almost popped out of their orbits. Indeed, it was not the speech one would expect to hear from a cultivated and rational man as Mr. Archer always considered Uriah to be. The Garden of Eden... What is he talking about? Mr. Archer looked at his friend without comprehending the latter's gibberish about mankind, Eden, truth and myth. There was too much for his brain to handle at once. Nevertheless, Gabriel allowed himself to be carried away by the spell of the words. Every syllable, every letter struck his understanding, calling from far away, like sonorous mermaids perched upon a rock of an insurmountable height. Undoubtedly, Uriah's words had woken in Gabriel Archer a feeling of mystery and unknown. The syllables were coming out of his friend's mouth, but the lips seemed to play a game of mime, and yet the sounds were audible, vivid, and clear. And still Gabriel couldn't understand, couldn't grasp the full meaning. It was English Uriah was speaking in, but then it was not. It was a language one only hears in a lunatic asylum. Slowly, the thought of his friend having lost his mind passed through his brain like a bullet shot by an invisible rifle. Anyone, in Gabriel Archer's place, would have thought the same just by watching Uriah performing strange antics of words and thoughts, mingling reason with impossible fancies as if he were in the arena with the devil himself. He was waving his hands, raising them to the ceiling, gnashed his teeth in a mad grimace; then he would saunter about in an uncontrollable manner.

"I can save mankind", he kept repeating. "I can rejuvenate the universe. Do you understand?"

"What ails you, my friend?" Mr. Archer inquired when he found himself able to talk, and his voice quavered with pity. He was getting more and more concerned about the sanity of his agitated acquaintance.

Uriah's eyes bulged and almost popped out of their orbits.

"What ails me? Good gracious, man! I can't believe my ears. I am telling you that something extraordinary has just happened and you mention affliction. I have discovered the cradle of God and the spring of immortality, and you look upon me as if I were on my deathbed. Seriously, my friend, it is you who is afflicted by all these ignoramuses who have been forcing their sermons down your neck. But I am not blaming you entirely. I have had my share of doubts. It's the damn century we're living in that keeps chocking us with bare facts. Listen, Gabriel, you have been living in a reality that I have always considered to be a complete and utter fallacy. I have always said it has to be more than this. Man is not born only for misery and suffering, he is also destined to achieve greatness. The Garden of Eden has truly existed. Not in Heaven, but on Earth is where it is located. Or was...It matters not. What is really important is to decide whether God created Eden, or man himself in his primitive religious zeal tried to build a utopia that would separate man from beast. But I doubt Eden is just a figment of the imagination and I will prove it once I am there. I have to identity the object or animal that is the Vessel..."

"The Vessel?" mumbled Gabriel, at a loss of what else to say or understand from all these. "What do you mean by 'vessel'?" "Are you referring to the Holy Grail?"

"Of course not... The Holy Grail did not exist in the Garden of Eden. I am talking about something else,

something much more important than a wine goblet. The Vessel is the object or animal, it could even be a plant for all I know or a tree, where God has placed His soul. You see it is a kind of Horcrux but in a positive sense."

"God's soul?!... Horcrux?!... What are you talking about?"

"It is all written in my father's manuscript. When God created this world, He had to make a sacrifice or otherwise He would have failed in His attempt. He had to sacrifice a part of His soul and place it inside this world so that mankind would spring out of a heavenly source, protected by the divine blessing. Without a part of God's soul, creation wouldn't have been possible, and life on earth couldn't have been sustained. Now, after God separated a part of His own soul, He had to choose wisely who or which might prove the best vessel."

"Do you mean Adam? The Bible does say that man was made in God's image."

"Sincerely, I doubt it was Adam, and do you know why? He ate from the forbidden fruit which he wouldn't have done had he been God's vessel. Once you become a Vessel, you see clearly what hides behind the games of deception, whereas Adam blindly followed Eve. No, the Vessel must have been something else."

"What about the apple?"

"What?"

"You know, the forbidden fruit, the fruit of knowledge, the reason Adam and Eve were kicked out of Heaven..."

"It couldn't have been the apple. The serpent tried to make Adam and Eve feed themselves with it. He wouldn't have done that had the apple been the Vessel. The serpent would have tried to eat the apple himself and thus destroy the essence of the Vessel."

"Maybe he couldn't eat from the tree of knowledge. I am sure God had that place protected against evil."

"You are wrong, my friend. Evil cannot be uprooted from its positive opposite. They simply coexist. I am sure that the serpent could have harmed the Vessel if it would have been the fruit of knowledge. No, the Vessel must have been of a different nature. Like I've said, it's a kind of Horcrux. Do you know what a Horcrux is? It is an object where an evil creature hides a bit of its soul in order to attain immortality. Well, in our case God was already immortal and indestructible, so He only wanted His creation to last long."

"And God wasn't evil."

"He sure wasn't. However, His Vessel is the opposite pair of the Horcrux. My father called this type of Horcrux, the Vessel, only that he was at a loss at finding out what and where the Vessel is. And that is precisely what I intend to do, my friend, I'll locate the Vessel and then summon God."

"What? Are you insane?" Mr. Gabriel Archer was almost shouting now.

"Calm, yourself, my friend! I am neither insane, nor playing pranks. I just want to get to the bottom of all these and complete my father's life work. Don't you realize? My father had sensed that the Vessel's cycle was coming to an end, and he tried to prepare me for the quest. Only that I refused to understand. I am not repeating the same mistake, Archer, not with the expense of all the people and of this beautiful world."

"Hey, let's pretend, and I strictly outline 'pretend', let's pretend that you're making sense, which I am not implying that you truly are. It's just pretending, got me?"

Uriah nodded with a look of exasperation on his face.

"Let's pretend", Gabriel went on, "that you are right. Then, why do you have to summon God? Wouldn't it be a sin? Can't you just become a Vessel and not upset God?"

"No, it would be my duty to both my father and God. I want my Creator to witness the beauty of His creation in all the glory of survival. It is fascinating, don't you agree with me? It is fascinating to embrace death and then to be reborn as a new being."

"You are frightening me, Uriah. You really are. Can't you let the Vessel do his job, or whatever he's doing, and go on with your own life?"

"I am afraid that it is simply impossible. You see, the Vessel has been having God's essence for a long time. It is overwhelming and consuming. It will end up by self-destroying itself, and once God's soul unleashed, the powers of evil will sense it. The darkness will try to take over and possess the soul and that would be the end of our world, and God's creation would perish."

"But isn't God the All Mighty one? Couldn't He put the soul into a new Vessel? Maybe, He already did that. Maybe your sacrifice is not needed anymore."

"No, you are wrong. After He had completed the sacrifice and renounced to a part of His Soul, He has no longer any claim on the part of His soul He has offered in exchanged for His creation to be possible. There is only one way to save the situation. I need to identify the Vessel before it destroys itself and plead with it to pass the burden unto me."

"And how are you going to convince the Vessel?"

"By proving myself worthy of its trust. I am sure the Vessel will know whether I am fit for the task or not. But I have to get there before evil finds it."

"When you are talking about evil, do you refer to..."

"To Satan? Yes, he is the darkness which clogs this world, and silently awaits to have his revenge and destroy God's creation."

Mr. Gabriel Archer stared wildly at his friend, finding hard to believe all that he had heard.

"How do you know all these things? What if your father was mistaken?"

"I have thought the same, until recently. I know you find it hard to believe, but trust me, my father was not mistaken. He was a visionary."

"His visions might not have been accurate. No man holds the ultimate truth, Uriah. I thought you already knew that. It pains me to see that I was mistaken."

"Archer, my father's vision never failed him. Pay close attention to what I'm going to say. I am about to confess to you something my family had been keeping secret for generations. You are not to confide the information to none, do you understand?"

"More secrets?! Uriah, seriously, I am sick and tired. It's early in the morning. I have been unexpectedly woken up from my sleep. I haven't even managed to take a shower or to have breakfast. Seriously, have you lost your mind?"

"Gabriel Archer, we've known each other for so long. Can't you tell by now that it is a question of life and death?"

"For Heaven's sake, Uriah, stop fooling around."

"I am not", yelled Uriah. "For Heaven's sake, I am telling the truth. Can you at least try to hear me out? Please, as a friend."

"Y..Y...Ye..s...." poor Gabriel Archer mumbled.

"Fine, thank you." The sarcasm had filled his voice, but then he went on in a more passionate and exalted manner.

"This is a secret that has been passed down from generation to generation, from father to son. We are the descendants of The Wooden Cross, an ancient religious order that has existed for centuries, since Christ's crucifixion. Every man in my family has studied the mysterious laws of the universe, in the hope of finding the Vessel of whom even Christ had often spoke. But Christ had never clearly stated who or what the Vessel might be. So, it's up to us to guess. My father tried to initiate me into the order's wisdom. That is why every man in my family has been a librarian; that is why I ended up being a librarian. We are the guardians of knowledge, because we have been invested with the powers of deciphering the word's hidden meanings. Of course, I didn't view my career from this angle. Despite all my father's sermons of me being his truthful descendant, I rejected his teachings, thinking that my father was mad when he had been right all the time. I was so wrong and blind, but now the blindfolds have fallen. I know now for sure... When I think there are people who doubt everything, I feel like laughing in their faces. The Garden of Eden exists, opening for us the gates of immortality. Do not understand it in the literary sense of one individual living forever, but in the collective sense of the entire mankind. Even nature changes its face from season to season. Perhaps we need only to acknowledge the fact that mankind being a part of nature can never perish. It always regenerates. And I am right, aren't I? The world hasn't been made in six days only to end in the seventh. It is all about death and rebirth. But when we stepped outside the Garden, after

God had banished Adam and Eve, and forced us into exile; we forgot completely the way back. Still, the process of forgetting couldn't have been easy, and sometimes flashes of memory return to haunt the mind of man. Sadly, man refuses to see. Locked behind scientific explanations, he refuses to acknowledge his origins. But my father had never been a man who would erase a thought if science contradicted its validity; and thanks to my father and to others like him, I could come up today with the solution."

The situation was getting more and more serious and Mr. Gabriel Archer liked it less and less. He didn't know how he should react, how Uriah would expect him to react. They have been friends for so many years, and friends are expected to help each other. But how, can he, Gabriel Archer, be of any use? He felt weak and feeble, like an old man whose impotency and lack of vitality leave him helpless. Moreover, Mr. Archer wasn't even sure of his own faculties. What if his own mind is playing him tricks? What would happen if he closed his eyes? Would Uriah disappear? But no, Uriah did come and he did say those words.

"But you will get to be immortal once you become the Vessel, won't you? Isn't it all in your benefit or for your own personal glory?"

Uriah sadly shook his head.

"Once I am the Vessel, I cease to exist. God's soul, even if it is a tiny part, is much too powerful for anything in this world to contain. Gabriel, in order to become the Vessel, I have to die. This is the sacrifice I am willing to pay."

"But if you die, then all it would be in vain, no?"

"I will not physically die, but I'll no longer be Uriah. Even if I will have the memories of my life and

of the people I used to know, I will also remember the collective history of all mankind. Don't you understand, Gabriel? The real Uriah will be sucked up inside of me, while I'll become a vessel, a cold and impartial vessel, filled with God's essence."

"What sorcery has possessed you, Uriah, my friend? It pains me to see you like this." said Mr. Archer in awe, frightened by the man who was standing in front of him, talking so strangely about being God's vessel and fighting the Prince of Darkness.

Uriah frowned and nervously clenched his fists. It was true that he hadn't expected Gabriel to embrace enthusiastically his theories, but neither had been prepared for the scrutinizing gaze inside which curiosity was mingled with fear.

"The sorcery of TRUTH, or at least the possibility of learning the truth about God and His presence in this world has possessed me," roared Uriah into Gabriel's ear. "And if you were really my friend, you would never question my senses. I am not asking to jump headlong with me. I am only asking you to trust me and to admit the possibility of me being right."

The words exploded and hit the understanding of Gabriel Archer. Astounded and silenced, he leaned against the wall not knowing what to do next. Sweat was draining down his spine. It was a cold sweat, freezing his flesh, and paralyzing his faculties. He felt like a calf goaded to the sacrificial place. His eyes were blankly fixed on Uriah, failing to see him as a friend. Gabriel had never been more afraid of Uriah than he was now.

Tired of seeing Gabriel prostrated like a shot giant bird, and losing his patience, Uriah walked straight to the living-room, shouting at his friend to follow him.

Mr. Archer did not dare to contradict him. He tittered and stepped slowly, one foot at a time as if he was now learning how to walk. The living-room was in fact a small room with only a sofa and a library, but Uriah entered reverently as if he had stepped into a room where all the population of the world had gathered to listen to what he was going to unravel. Presently, there was no one in the house except Gabriel, the aunt having gone to pay a visit to a distant relative and she was due to return in a week's time. So the two friends' secrets were safe within the walls of that room. Had Gabriel's aunt been present, it wouldn't have mattered for Uriah who was ready to hurl his discovery into everybody's face, but to Gabriel it would have been an embarrassing thing. He would have had to find excuses for Uriah and stop his aunt from spreading the gossip to their neighbours.

Mr. Archer followed him obediently from behind, still poring over that strange situation. Dragging his slippers, he covered in the back of his determined friend. Although a tall man, Uriah appeared gigantic in the light of the electric bulb. Gabriel was not as tall as Uriah, but right then he felt like a midget, a tiny ant at the foot of a menacing predator. Prostrated, Gabriel watched his friend moving towards the curtains. Uriah pulled them up, allowing the light of that October morning to fill the room. Soon the floor was bathed in showers of raw sunrays. Forgetting all about Gabriel, Uriah looked out of the window. Clouds of a pearly colour were running in a hurry on the silvery sky, and early passers-by had begun to appear, which only meant that London was waking up to life in that part of the neighbourhood too. Nobody saw the spectator and nobody felt the scrutinizing gaze. As he stood there at the window, he felt so far away, so distant,

and untoachable. Endless miles were separating him from his fellow creatures, and he loathed this division. He would have wanted to hurl into their faces the truth about their existence, and to make them aware of something greater and more meaningful than day to day life. Perhaps, they would have called him a liar and a false prophet, but he never wanted to be a prophet or a vessel. Like them, he was feeling lonely, devoid of divinity, and like them he needed the patriarchal figure of a loving and caring God. Like them, he was longing for company, and unlike them, he was ready to search every nook and corner for the lost Father. Disgusted by the human spectacle, Uriah turned his face from the outside world; then gravely, he stood again face to face with Mr. Archer. Uriah noticed that his friend's complexion had lost all its colours, presenting before the eyes the cadaveric paleness of a corpse. Mr. Gabriel Archer was more astonished than ever, and quite eager to get to the bottom of the whole thing, and to release himself from Uriah's ominous presence.

"Look, Gabriel!" Uriah's voice was calmer than ever. He had opened his leather suitcase. It was then that Gabriel noticed that his friend was holding something in his hands. For a moment, Gabriel Archer feared the dreadful thing that Uriah might pull out from inside. It was a childish fear, but Gabriel acknowledged that that day had not quite begun in an ordinary fashion. So Gabriel's eyes glued themselves to the leather suitcase. It ceased to be a simple object. It was the representation of the Pandora's Box. His friend had been carrying it all along, but only then its presence impressed itself upon everything. Uriah opened it and pulled out to light a manuscript. It appeared to be old and tattered at the edges. Gabriel's curiosity was greater than ever. He carefully

observed each movement made by Uriah. The latter, after having taken the manuscript from the suitcase, advanced towards him. He only made a few steps, but Gabriel drew back, leaning against the wall which had arrested his movements.

"It won't hurt you just to look at it, Gabriel. Trust me, you'll survive and live to tell your children and grandchildren about this day."

Uriah was getting closer, and Gabriel heard the echo of the solid soles resounding through the heavy Turkish carpet, until the sound of the steps drowned as it hit the floor. Their eyes met and Gabriel felt the burning sensation of a piercing and unyielding gaze. There was silence between them, and benumbed questions and answers floated in the air like leaves fallen from the Tree of Heaven. And when Uriah opened the manuscript before Gabriel, the rapture increased. The latter's eyes fell on a weird drawing. Unable to resist, Gabriel bent over and adjusted his glasses. He wanted to see everything clearly and fix the scene in his memory. The drawing presented before the eyes of the beholder the sandy landscape of a desert. In the middle of that bareness, there was a dot of black colour trapped in the center of a red fiery triangle. The triangle itself was drawn inside a yellow square which was also encapsulated by a huge blue pentagram. At the top of the pentagram it was a serpent curled up like an arrow pointing north while at the bottom there was a wavering line.

"Last night, I found a book written by an unknown scholar, John Gos", Uriah was almost shouting with excitement in Mr. Archer's ear. "Have you heard about him?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"Neither have I", Uriah confessed. "I do not know for how long it has been lying unnoticed on the shelf for I do not remember when it was brought into the library. And this, my good chum, is already a strange thing in itself. I know every corridor, every hall, even every speck of dust that is left by the clumsy hands of the charwoman. The library in its entirety is like a picture whose distinguishable traits I have memorized by heart. Ever since I was a little boy, I was fascinated by the mysterious world of fiction. I used to accompany my father at work, and my playground had been the silent halls and the aisles between shelves where I wandered and wandered, like Peter Pan in Neverland which is the metaphorical version of No man's land... I have read every book, and I can tell the location of every literary item from miles. Blindfolded, in shackles, or without my senses, and I can still find any volume a reader may desire. I am a hound, my friend, a book hound. I know my books by smell, I have read them all, I have studied them all, and I have attended to each and every one of them with the love of a father for his children. So imagine my surprise to acknowledge the fact that I had failed to do my duty properly, since only a night before our present conversation, I came across a new book, one I hadn't yet read. I couldn't be more puzzled than I was the moment when I found this urchin of paper that I had neglected to fondle and caress. Well, better said, it was the book that found me, Gabriel; for if it hadn't slipped from the upper shelf that contained it, probably I wouldn't have laid my eyes on it. My dear Gabriel, can't you see? I was all alone in the reading room of the Ancient Literature's section. Not even a gust of wind could have caused the book to fall because the windows had been closed. I know that for sure because I have checked the

windows. They were fast closed. Still, the book did fall and I was there to pick it up. Do you understand now? I was destined to find it. Someone, for all I know it might have been God Himself, has directed my steps towards it, sensing the time has come for a new Vessel. And I am the last of the Order of The Wooden Cross as I have no child to pass on the legacy. I lifted the book from the floor and took it in my hands with piety and sat at my desk to read it. I couldn't do otherwise. And, Gabriel, it indeed felt as if a mysterious power had led me to that book. I found printed on a page the same drawing you are now looking at. It is the duplicate of the drawing my father made on the sheet of paper I am holding in my hand. Perhaps, my father copied the book and the manuscript is the real duplicate. I cannot know for sure and all my thoughts are reeling. But, unlike the manuscript which doesn't offer any explanation, the book explains it all."

Still holding the drawing with one hand, Uriah felt his pockets with the other free hand, and quickly he pulled out a piece of paper. There he had all the details written down.

"The black dot," he began to explain, "represents the world and all the forces of life that lie at its core. Like an eddy springing from the unknown depths of the earth, the world springs from God. And if you look closely, the tiny dot has a luminous nucleus. There, in a perfect circle of light and darkness, lies hidden the part of God's soul, and what you are taking now for a simple black dot it's in fact the Vessel. It is black because it resides in this world, susceptible to both good and evil forces. Still, evil cannot touch it, since the dot has been enclosed inside a fiery triangle. The triangle symbolizes the Divine Genius and All Mighty Reason that has made this world possible."

The flames that burn the edges of the triangle stand both for illumination as well as for destruction. They warn us that at some point, the black dot will burn itself out, and that is why the triangle is protected by the confines of the yellow square. The square represents all the elements that conceal and at the same time reveal the fifth element which is creation itself. As a living matter, I identify myself to the laws of natural elements. I am capable of penetrating through the fiery barrier of the triangle, reaching the Vessel and switching places with it. Only in the triangle, deep in the consecrated space of the Garden of Eden, the Vessel will be able to reveal itself to me, as I am the bearer of phenomenal light. And you must notice the blue pentagram which encapsulates all. The pentagram is the sum of contraries whose nexus is the life of all beings, both organic and inorganic. From the pentagram, it may also descent another force, the opposite of the light I am bearing. That is why, I have to calculate my movements, because if I am right and indeed I've been warned that the Vessel is losing its strength, the darkness must have also sensed that, and undoubtedly it would try to get there first. Now, don't get me that look of panic, Archer. Good must prevail over evil. It always does. Trust me."

"Are you so sure?" Gabriel asked incredulously.

Uriah looked him straight in the eye. He felt tempted to tell a joke and assure Gabriel that nothing could go wrong and that God would assist him on the way. But that would be a lie, since right after God's renouncement to one part of His soul, He became weaker. He doesn't have the strength to battle with the devil directly. That is why He sent His son, Christ, to die on the cross and deliver mankind from sin. He was forbidden to descent in the world as one part of Him lived in the Vessel. Uriah smiled complacently to Gabriel.

"My dear friend, we have to be sure that good will prevail over evil. It's the only hope we are left with."

Understanding dawned on Gabriel Archer who asked no more questions. After a brief silence, Uriah resumed his explanations.

"The arrow has the shape of a serpent, because the life of man is shortened by Time. And time is wise and deadly. He alone knows when a man has to disappear for another man to take his place, and no one can outlive his destined time. Nevertheless, man is beguiled by Eternity, and towards it he aspires, wanting to restore his original condition. But Eternity is out of man's reach because life is founded upon an inconstant basis of existence which always flows in the gulf of non-existence."

A long silence followed Uriah's speech, as Gabriel tried to allow the words to sink into his understanding. He had seen the drawing and listened to his friend's presentation, still he was at a loss at what to say.

"And where is the key to unlocking God's whereabouts?" Gabriel asked more puzzled than ever, trying to keep up with what his friend was busy explaining to him.

Uriah bestowed upon his friend a most condescended smile, and he turned the page of the manuscript. There another drawing awaited the inquisitive mind of man to discover its enigma.

"At first, when my father left me the manuscript, I wanted to thrust it into the fire. I had seen how much pain and suffering it had caused my father, and how I hated it for that. For endless sleepless nights, he had hovered over its pages, like a mighty eagle over an abyss. I was only a child, but I heard his steps pacing the study. That pace was my lullaby, and I used to think that my father was

watching over me. One day when I was playing in that room, I found the manuscript. My father had forgotten to lock it inside the desk's drawer. I took it from the table and held it close to my face. I was fascinated by the strange drawings my father had etched. Curious to find out more about the drawings I asked my father to tell me their story. Immediately, his face tightened as if closing behind an iron mask. He told me that I was not ready. I was not of age. When I asked him what age ought I to have, he said 12, like the 12 apostles. I was 7. I didn't understand his words so I showered him with more questions. But he flatly refused to answer. He was even angry. Even now I see his eyebrows twitching and his pupils darting arrows of fire. He spoke no harsh word and he didn't reprimand me, but from that day on he forbade me to come near the manuscript, not until I was 12. I did not understand at first, and I was furious. It was the first secret that estranged me from my father. At least, he allowed my presence in the room. Or better said, he completely forgot about me being there, and thus I would creep and hide in a corner where I could watch him, without fearing I might be discovered.

He sat in his armchair with his head bent over the pages. Not for an instant did he raise his head to look at me. Completely absorbed by what he was doing, he would draw and take notes, forgetting all and everything around him. I was only a boy, and he was a man; and my feeble mind failed to understand the ways of man. And when I turned 12, I refused to listen to my father's words or to pay special attention to the manuscript. Had my father entrusted me with the manuscript's knowledge when I was 7, I would have been ready to receive the legacy. Instead, I grew up around the curse of the manuscript, without guessing the blessing hidden

in it, pressed upon it by the dew of my father's toil. Yes, to my shame, even after his death, I couldn't understand why he had wanted me to have this weird picture book. You know, he could have given me something else, a car or a more beautiful mansion than the one I live in. Don't look at me like this, Archer. You know me better, and I have never been a greedy or vain person. It was just that I didn't understand the ways of my father or why he had thought this manuscript important for as long as he had lived and even after his death. As far as I was concerned, I saw no value in it, and I had kept thinking like this until I found the very book I've been talking to you about. And now I understand. It was his legacy to me. The manuscript was going to be the guiding voice I needed to hear when I would be ready to embark on such a difficult journey. Indeed, he always told me that I would understand later and that the key of my understanding would one day find me. He was right. Who knows? It could have been my father who hid the book in the library before his retirement, confident that I would come across it, as he was confident that I wouldn't throw his manuscript to the garbage bin. And so I did keep my legacy.

Doesn't fate work her mysterious ways and plays with us mortals as if we were dolls waded with cotton? Anyway, this is my legacy, and I can't deny it. If I closed my eyes before the bare facts, it would be like going against nature. It is my legacy. My Destiny! My friend, I am not asking you to believe in me straight away. Had I been in your shoes, I would have been skeptical too. For Heaven's sake, I didn't even believe my own father. Honestly, I don't know what is waiting for me at the end of the road. But I am asking you as my friend, to have faith and to be open to any possibility."

Uriah paused, taking a long deep breath, and then urged Gabriel to look carefully at the drawing for the last time.

"Please, my friend, tell me what else you see there!"

Uriah Reed's voice had the resonance of a tragedian, who perched upon the scene cries over to the audience and casts his words like thunder. Uriah bade his friend to notice the drawing. And Gabriel looked, all the more feeling dizzy by the strange gibberish of his friend. The old Mr. Archer felt as if he were bending over an unfathomable fountain where an unseen creature had nested. An unseen and lethal creature...He couldn't resist and lowered his eyelashes, allowing the eyes to rest upon the mysterious drawing. In the background, the picture showed a man and a woman descending into a subterranean valley.

"Can you guess who they are? They are Adam and Eve, the first pair God has created and the first guardians of the Vessel!" Uriah kept shouting in Gabriel's ears. "I read in my father's manuscript. He didn't believe the story told by the Bible that Eve was created out of Adam's ribs. Eve has to be unique in order to complement the opposite. She couldn't have been taken from an existing matter. Therefore, God must have created her at the same time with Adam, and not after creating the masculine principle, and most certainly not out of the masculine principle. Who knows? Perhaps, Eve came first, as she is par excellence the feminine principle, a symbol of nurture and fertility. And I am determined to find out why the masculine and feminine dyad governs the law of nature. The entire world is a harmonic mathematics, a system of counts where opposites add and form the most interesting unity the universe can create. The pair of

opposites... Day and night, the sun and the moon, light and darkness, masculine and feminine... Look at them, behold, my friend, Adam and Eve, my founding parents, your founding parents. They represent one unity in duality, but as they descend into the valley they become one, and the duality fades away. Look!"

Gabriel looked carefully, narrowing his little eyes. In the natural light of the room, the drawing appeared to augment, whereas the room seemed to sink into the floor. The drawn valley had absorbed Gabriel and Uriah into it, and for a brief moment, Gabriel almost felt the salty odour of hot sand, and the rustling blades of grass. Adam and Eve... They were holding hands, and contrary to the common belief, Eve's hair was not fair at all. It was dark blue like the night, like the nocturnal mystery under whose sign the feminine principle has always been subjected. Adam's hair was red blonde, like the fiery sun which generates warmth and growth, and without which night would forever be infertile and cold. The pair was beautiful to behold, as they descended in the green valley. Purity was written on their faces, and their eyes had the clarity of fresh waters, invigorating the desert and the heath.

"Perhaps it was them who had created the oasis in the middle of the desert", cried Uriah excited. "Perhaps, God knew that He alone couldn't have had the ability to fertilize nature. At least not after He placed so much soul inside this world... Their love had been the spring, the source of all creation, and this love had to be protected."

Gabriel knew that Uriah was right. Adam and Eve were two individualized beings. Despite this ontological opposition, the shadow of the pair seemed to unite at the bottom of the valley. Their barren feet were treading upon

a golden rail of sunrays, while the desert was stirred by sandy gusts of wind. They were not dressed, but neither were they naked. Eve was completely covered in a veil of white light that seemed to come out of Adam, whereas Adam was screened by the long locks of Eve's dark hair. They complemented each other, fusing with their opposite self.

Suddenly, Gabriel Archer's attention was drawn by something else, something he failed to notice until then. At the bottom of that peculiar flight of stairs, a Latin word had appeared in the light of their descent. It was inlaid in the vigorous bark of a mighty tree, behind which a grassy meadow could be seen. Gabriel adjusted his glasses nervously, his hands shaking on the rim, and spelt aloud the written word:

S E M P E R

III

"You do understand, Gabriel, don't you? The subterranean entrance gives access to the spot where everything began and where the Vessel might be. What we have before our very eyes is the cradle of mankind, the starting point of creation. I have to find it, to descend under the earth and find God and Eternity, and most of all, save mankind from falling into the wrong hands. Oh, Gabriel, I feel like weeping with joy, like tearing my attire and scratching my back until wings will sprout between my ribs; wings that will carry me there where everything is still and life and death are just vapors of distant ideas. Alas, you don't know what it is hidden in my soul, the tumult, the force... An entire world is hidden, like in a forest where each tree bears leaves of different shades of colour. Dreams, joys, and hopes, they are all scattered in a heap of fragrance and materialization. Gabriel, I have never known happiness before today."

For a time, Gabriel was silent. He couldn't utter a word. What could he have said? That Uriah was hallucinating? But what if the impossible was very possible? Mr. Gabriel Archer had listened to a phantasmagoric speech, he had seen a strange drawing, and now he thought he knew what ailment afflicted his friend. It was the same ghost of immortality that rides with the night and approaches the bed of the sons of God, alluring them with falsehood and illusions. And Uriah

had seen this ghost and let himself caught in the firm grip of a traitorous kiss. He had been seduced and maddened. Moreover, Uriah Reed had come to seduce Gabriel as well, to pour the cup of wistful desire into the dry throat of an old bachelor.

Trying to assess the impossibility of such an enterprise, Gabriel entreated Uriah.

"How will you find a place like the one depicted in the drawing? No one knows its location. It may not even exist. No, Uriah, do let me talk. The Vessel you are talking about could be just a hypothesis, but not an argument that God has really severed a part of His soul. Nobody holds the ultimate truth. It is a blasphemy, my friend. In the past, people were burnt at the stake for their heresies. I strongly advise you to take it slow."

"Fiddlesticks...In the past people were slaughtered because of other's heresies not their own, because those mighty judges, who claimed to be spotless, were just blindfolded idiots who refused to let truth into their hearts".

A frenzy of rage had taken over Uriah who kept denouncing the injustice and persecutions of all the innocents who lived in this world.

"When you associate me with heresy, you are mistaken, my Gabby Gabbs old Archer. Mine is not a heresy. I am the last descendant of the Order of The Wooden Cross and a Guardian of Knowledge. My father has entrusted me with a mission. My entire being has been filled, right from my birth onwards, with this impetus, this flow that guides me towards my destiny. I have to find the Vessel and summon God, touch His soul and assure Him that His creation will not go to waste. At least, not under my watch...And then, just think about it.

Would it be wrong for a son to search his Father? Even the young hart springs ahead of the old hart, trying to tread the path followed by the many deer which have run with the hunted. And I know where to run and where I am heading."

"Do you really know, Uriah?"

"Of course! If you examine closely both drawings, you'll notice that the flight of stairs is placed in the middle, just like the black dot."

"So what? I still don't get you."

Uriah frowned and raising the tone of his voice, he entrusted Gabriel with a mission.

"Bring me a map and I will point to you the center, the geographical nexus."

Like in a dream, the misty light of the day filled the room where the two friends were in. Uriah's green eyes looked greener and blue at the same time, and his voice bore the echoes of a mysterious power which had just been stirred. Gabriel moved from where he was standing, triggered by the command of his friend. He had no longer control over his movements and all his impulses came from outside. His thoughts were roaming in a bewildered land of confusion, but the old bachelor succeeded in keeping his wits. A deep furrow was splitting his wrinkled front, and his eyes had sunk into a bottomless pit. When he left the room, he took a long and deep breath, and his grave mien made him look older than he really was. A few moments later, he brought Uriah the coveted map and laid it on the only sofa he had in the room.

The map spread before them. All those countries, stretching flatly and lifeless, no circumvolution, no gurgling of waters, no rocky paths to tread... There were only shapes and colours, squares and circles, and other

variegated forms inside of which geographers had inlaid words, names of spaces and locations. There followed a period of silence as Uriah was carefully examining the map. His eyes were searching madly. He had to be very accurate about the location. No mistake was allowed. Everything had to be perfect. An error would cause all his plans to collapse to the ground the manner a violent gust of wind would blow and scatter the fragile sandcastles. The tension reached its summit. Gabriel also felt the pressure of the situation and the helplessness of not being able to judge the right from wrong.

Uriah's eyes kept searching on the map. Every geographical dot and undulation was x-rayed, the librarian oscillating like a mind sailor on the ocean of his investigation. Both his reason and his imagination travelled to all four cardinal points, and finally the silence was broken by a victorious cry.

"There!" Uriah shouted triumphantly, pointing with his finger on the map. "There!"

Gabriel looked. The finger of his friend was resting on a tiny spot.

"The center of the earth is Palestine".

"Are you sure?" Gabriel blinked incredulously. "I mean how can you accurately determine the center of a round planet?"

"Gabriel, if you cut an apple in two halves, you find the seeds hidden at the core. The same applies to our planet as well. I know I am right."

"Really?"

"Positive."

"Palestine...I would never have imagined."

"Yes, because each nation has an ethnocentric image of itself. I bet you were thinking that the Garden

of Eden must be located in the heart of the Great Britain, or somewhere in The New World. But you couldn't have been more wrong. The land of Israel, the Nazareth of Jesus Christ, the Palestine crossed by the Jordan River, they all connect. The Garden of Eden must be out there."

Before the two librarians, the Holy Land stretched endlessly, flooded by the Jordan River until it reached the sandy boundaries of the Arabian Desert. Like wings of a red phoenix, the roads laid their still flight onto the fertile ground of Egypt, billowing in the ashes of the earth. The Mediterranean land, the plains, and the groves, as well as the fields of grain were inviting the two distant travelers to begin their journey and discover the legendary oasis of a sacred space.

"And now what? What are you going to do about it?" asked Gabriel when he managed to talk again.

"Isn't that obvious? I am leaving for Palestine."

Mr. Gabriel Archer's amazement was getting higher than ever. Had he heard well?

"Are you serious, Uriah?"

"Of course, I am. This is not a question of options, Gabriel. If I don't go now, I'll be asking all my life why I didn't follow my heart. Even if I chose to be skeptical, as I have been all my life until now, and the world would start collapsing after the Vessel's consumption, wouldn't I be responsible for having known the truth and the way, and yet I followed the path of cozy ignorance? I couldn't live with that on my conscience, and I can't leave this world to die or in the hands of darkness. I love this world, Gabriel. It is the world I was born into. It may not be perfect, but it's my home."

"Still, I think you should reconsider."

"There is no more time. I feel it."

"But what about your job as a librarian?" asked Mr. Archer trying desperately to hold onto something material, palpable; perhaps hoping besides hope that he would talk some common sense into Uriah. "You love being a librarian, mate."

"Yes, I love my books, but most of all, I love the people who wrote those books, who made possible for us to imagine all these amazing worlds of fiction. Don't you realize, Gabriel? If the Vessel self-destroys itself, there will be no more books, no more people to stargaze and dream of the impossible. I cannot let that happen. I may close my eyes, and hope the Vessel lasts until the end of this century, and it indeed might last, but what about the future generations? They deserve a chance and I am not taking that away from them. I don't have heirs to pass over this quest to them, like my father did. So you see, Archer, there is no other way. Besides, I am tired, Gabriel Archer, so tired of this piercing feeling of having wasted my life away. I didn't listen to my father. All this time, he tried to warn me about the existence of the Vessel, and I turned my back away. And now he is gone, and I cannot go to pat his shoulder and apologize."

"I know he would be proud of you."

"Sadly, I will never get to hear that from him, too. Anyway, I have to leave the library. Yes, I love being a librarian, but I wouldn't have become one had it not been for my father. He made me love books for the knowledge they provided. Yes, books have filled my loneliness and fed my mind and soul, but sadly, it is not enough. I must think of the future generation of writers and of those books that might improve life for the better, and which might help people fulfill their dreams. Even though, I am a librarian, that doesn't mean that I am not a man of flesh

and bones. I have also dreams and expectations, and all I did was to bury them deep inside my heart. But I am done with lamentations. I am the Guardian of Knowledge and the next Vessel if I get there on time. The moment has arrived for me to write my own story rather than reading the stories written by others."

Mr. Gabriel Archer nodded gravely, but he seemed to agree with his friend.

"And when are you leaving?"

"As soon as possible. And I am taking you along."

The announcement fell like a drum beat, pounding in the walls of the entire house, shaking the window panes and scratching the glass, creeping ominously under the flimsy carpet where the owner of the house had placed his feeble feet, until it reached and clawed the soul of Mr. Gabriel Archer who stared dumbfounded at Uriah with the awe-inspiring gaze of a monkey from beneath the grates of its cage. Prisoner of common truth, Gabriel was finally released and thrown in the arms of a new Truth. And his liberator resembled a shaggy God who had donned the costume of a common man, of a librarian. And Gabriel instantly knew that he would follow everywhere that shaggy God.

**

That day Uriah did not return to the library. After setting the matters with Gabriel who reluctantly agreed to accompany him, he went to his house. He knew what he had to do. His steps were now lighter and calmer, and a firm resolution shone brightly in his movements, face, and eyes. Arriving home, he went straight to the phone and called the library. A secretary answered and

Uriah demanded to speak to the director. A few seconds later, the director's voice was heard from the other end of the receiver. The latter didn't seem surprised. He had expected something like that to happen. Uriah had worked himself too much, past the endurance of a common man, and it was clear he needed to find something else in life, a new path. The conversation was brief, ending with the director's best wishes for the future, and when he hung up the phone, Uriah was now officially unemployed. There was no way back. The journey had one ticket only; there could be no returning after becoming the Vessel. As for Gabriel, he would return, but not after taking with him the pieces of information concerning how to get to Eden and how to become a Vessel after Uriah's self destruction when the time would come. Uriah knew he himself could not contain God's soul ad infinitum and that a new Vessel would be needed sooner or later. He had instructed Gabriel to return to England in secret, carrying with him the secrets of the whole enterprise. Then, he was to search for a man called Mr. Bittman, a priest whom Uriah trusted. That priest would pass for a lawyer, and he would present himself to the man or woman who might be a potential Vessel, saying that he/she had inherited Uriah Reed's legacy, i.e. the manuscript and the diary. Uriah had decided to follow his father in everything, and from now on, he would put his thoughts on paper. It would help him clear his mind.

As a matter of fact, he didn't feel so comfortable about all that. He should have acted alone, but he needed someone to pass on his duty. Uriah could only hope that Gabriel wouldn't get hurt along the way. The journey itself should not take long. Enough time for him to find what he was searching for. He put the suitcase next to his office

and locked the manuscript in a secret compartment of another suitcase smaller in size than the first one. Then, he went to the kitchen. On the wall, a little clock was chiming loudly. The time was now a quarter to ten in the morning. Uriah opened the fridge and took some sandwiches from inside. He quickly ate something, having no time to tackle with cooking, and with a mug filled with hot tea he sat down on the armchair near the fireplace.

The fire roared pleasantly, warming the coldness he felt within. It was all a joke, him pretending to act normal, eating, resting, and thinking like all human beings. But it was all a charade. Uriah was worried. He didn't have second thoughts, but he was worried that he would fail and disappoint his father. No, that couldn't happen. Mechanically, he raised the mug to his lips. After the first sip, his attention turned towards the manuscript which he had locked in the smaller suitcase. The document was calling him, was crying out to him until finally, not being able to resist it any longer, Uriah got up and went to his home office and unlocked the manuscript. He returned to the living room, and drawing the armchair even closer to the fireplace, he began to read from his father's manuscript. Soon, he lost the track of time. Lost deep in reading, he really experienced a sensation of genuine blending with his past and with the past of his father. It was the most powerful connection ever. Yes, he really felt like he was connecting with Mr. James Reed as if he was living the life his father lived when he was at that age. Mr. James Reed was a very strange man whose mind had been perturbed by mysterious visions and dreams. Like his son, he shot for the moon.

"Nothing is impossible," he used to say to his son, "if you have the guts to make it possible. All the bullshit

about limits, cause and effect, which science and logic has intoxicated us with is nothing but the small talk of poor idiots who didn't have balls."

Was his father right to believe that a man's will power can change the course of history or was he just a little dotty? It was precisely what Uriah was determined to find out. But honestly, he believed in his father. He had believed in him as a child, and he wouldn't change his feelings as an adult. More determined than ever, Uriah Reed swore that he would find God; he would find the God of his father.

A car honked loudly, scattering the wandering thoughts of Uriah Reed. The nature of the sound bore a strange feeling of violation, since Zman Street was usually quiet and undisturbed. Uriah Reed got up from the armchair and went to the window. His fingers drew the curtain and the feeble light of the setting sun fell over Uriah's tired face. He was beginning to feel drained of energy. The day's events had been too much for him. The slippery time had moved way too fast and as he looked outside, Uriah observed it was already evening. Having been so deeply absorbed by his reading, he scarcely noticed time going by. Lately he hardly noticed anything.

The air was getting harder to breathe, and Uriah opened the window wide. The fresh coolness of the evening filled his lungs. And everything outside seemed to be new, different from what Uriah had seen before. The streets were covered in a chiaroscuro canvas of movement and light mingled with shadow. The rhythm of the city vibrated inside the concrete veins of the paved boulevards and neighbourhoods, but the strangest thing of all was happening inside the mind of Uriah Reed. He was no longer witnessing the tumult and agitation of a typical

London neighbourhood view. The streets were populated with a motley crowd of people gone and present, ladies with richly garments and shoulders covered by beautiful embroidered shawls or ladies with their face hidden by dark or crimson capes; men with top hats and walking sticks, and carriages or tram horses. They were walking down the boulevard or travelling inside their carriages, laughing, kissing in the open, as the coachman was swishing his whip in the air, and the ladies were blushing under the quaint umbrellas with which they shielded against the sun. To this throng of past people, another throng was added. Men in elegant suits walked carelessly, holding briefcases or maps. Women and girls passed by, blushing in the beauty of their womanhood. And the sound of the car tyres echoed the chant of the carriage wheels. The entire scene was full of life, promises, and hopes for a future they anticipated in the distance. And the only one who understood their souls was a lonely watchman, Uriah Reed who then swore that he would find these souls again in the place where time stands still and the living essence of man soars to the sun of God's creation. Yes, every death is in fact a bridge that a soul crosses over to his new birth. We are all representations of our former selves and of the would-be selves.

These thoughts were now battling inside Uriah's mind, and as he was thus deep in thought, his attention was diverted by a sudden apparition. A dark silhouette passed by, crossing the street. It was the figure of a lady who was hurrying to get somewhere. She had just stepped out from a black cab, the same car whose horn had caused Uriah to come to the window. Uriah watched her attentively. She was young and feline, like a young female cheetah stretching her limbs in an agile spring of

life. There was something about her, something familiar in the way she moved and in the flutter of her raven-like hair. He couldn't clearly distinguish the traits of her face. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that if he just closed his eyes, he would complete in his mind the entire face of that woman. Never had he felt like this about a woman, never in his life had he looked in secret at a woman who was not aware of the fact that she was being watched. But Uriah just couldn't take his eyes from the shape of her soul. For the first time in his life, he was spellbound. Who was she? Had he met her before? He couldn't possibly have met her before. He would have remembered her if she had appeared to Ex Libris. No, it was the first time he saw her. And yet...Everything about her seemed so familiar. Suddenly, as if she was summoned by his thoughts, the woman raised her eyes and looked straight at him. From down below, Uriah seemed a human torch, his entire head set ablaze by the setting sun. The woman smiled amused by the peculiar image the unknown stranger had evoked inside her mind. Uriah didn't see the smile. From up above, he saw only the raven tresses fluttering in the glow of the twilight, but when she reached a shady street portion, she looked up again. Their eyes met, and for the first time Uriah didn't lower his gaze. He just kept staring at her, and she didn't take her eyes off him either.

Who are you?

He asked, but no words came out.

Will I see you again?

Uriah Reed didn't have time to hear the answers to these unvoiced questions as the woman soon disappeared from his view, taking with her all the charm and allure of plunging into the unknown ocean of the masculine self's encounter with the feminine other. A strange sensation of

loss and regret fell over Uriah. He closed the window and tried not to think about that unknown woman. He would probably not see her again. Smiling, he remembered the scene of an old movie where the protagonists travelled together and then forever parted. Life is like a momentary station where people stand in lines waiting for their train. Sometimes they embark in the same wagon, sometimes they take different routes. Nevertheless, they are doomed to say goodbye when the train stops to their station. Uriah smiled condescendingly. He shouldn't indulge in romantic thoughts. Not at his age, anyway. The woman was younger, beautiful, like a poem one reads spellbound and then closes his eyes to penetrate the deep meaning of the artistic effects. He is old, like an old knight, galloping towards his forties, but most of all, riding with the wind towards the horizon of a great adventure, i.e. the restoration of Eden on earth and the preservation of mankind. Thanks to him, if he succeeds, those long black tresses will get to be white, and that beauty he has momentarily spotted crossing the street, will ripe and grow into the mature exquisite model of a rapturous old lady. Uriah smiled again, this time the smile was addressed to him, for being so foolishly poetic in times of peril. He ought to shake away these thoughts. Therefore, his whole focus should now be upon the manuscript. Straining his will, he managed to rearrange his whirling logic around the idea that was now becoming an obsession. Yes, the manuscript opens the door to the realm of the unknown, and he is ready to venture himself into what would be the greatest realization of all mankind; that is the idea of immortality and eternity brought to life by the creative mind of a human being.

His mind was busy making plans, arranging pieces of information, and calculating his next movements. And

time, like a jailor coming to arrest the body, dawned on him. It was night, cold and dark, and loneliness floated heavily around him, touching with its misty fingers the shuddering soul of Uriah Reed. He yawned, feeling tired. He would have wanted to stay awake, read more, and study, but unfortunately, soon the lack of sleep began to tell sadly on him. His heavy eyelids felt like lead, and his movements lacked energy. Uriah couldn't have gone on like this. He simply had to get some rest.

When he went to bed that night, he placed the manuscript on his bed table next to his pair of glasses. He said his usual night prayer, and as soon as his head rested on the pillow, his eyelids closed over the blue light of his eyes, and sleep crept to his bed, like an invisible lover coming to embrace the soul that craves for rest. Uriah fell asleep. However, the night brought no peaceful dreams, but strange and tormenting glimpses of a remote past, as if two existences tried to reunite in the eternity of the unconsciousness. There was no more Uriah Reed. Lying in the bed, a body was tossing in its sleep, soulless and empty, while the soul was soaring to the unimaginable heights of intelligibility. When the soul stopped to rest in the arms of the wind, Uriah's mind caged inside the earthly body gave a long shriek, like a wounded bird. It had remembered. Hovering over the Valley of the Kings, the blue bird lowered down its head. The body was tossing and tossing in its sleep. The bird let herself go, and she fell and fell, whirling in the air, until it hit the chest of the sleeper. With its beak it bit and bit the flesh, digging its own way inside the body, hungrily searching for God's soul. Uriah was violently shaken, but he didn't awake. He was still dreaming the dreams woven by the spindlers of fate. He shrieked and collapsed in agony

from an insurmountable height. He had seen her, heard her, smelt her fragrance of roses and dewy meadow. The face of the unknown passer-by had returned at night to haunt him.

IV

The ivory bath had been filled with warm water by ten slave girls with hair as dark as night. They were all beautiful but not as beautiful as their mistress who had just entered the room. I watched her moving majestically across the richly adorned chamber. She was heading for the bath, just like a gazelle that would approach a running water stream in order to quench its thirst. Clouded in shadow, I followed her every movement, mesmerized by the contour of her body and noble figure. She had an outstanding appearance, proud and haughty, and yet all her features emanated an unspoken chastity that was heart-rending because it made her untouchable, almost like a holy olive branch. It was possible that others wouldn't have found her as beautiful as I did. But she was my idea of beautiful, and even if she were limp or disproportionate, it wouldn't have matter. I would still have found her beautiful, because I knew her soul.

Unaware of the nature of thoughts that were crossing my mind, the princess did not even cast me a glance. Neither did she turn her head in my direction, although she was aware of my presence. My fingers were joyfully caressing the strings of the harp, and I sang. I closed my eyes, and darkness fell upon the chamber. She was still moving, sliding on the walls of my mind, creeping inside my every thought. My voice rose softly in the air, hovering over my beautiful one. I was singing

about the Valley of the Kings were a wild rose grows and blue birds soar to the sun.

She had paused, listening, enraptured by my voice. Then, as if recovering from a spell, she called her servants. Smiling to the ten slave girls, she let herself attended by them. She was well aware of her beauty and proud of it.

The princess was soon disrobed of her beautiful garment which slid down her shoulders till it rested on a mould on the marble tills. I did not dare to watch, but my mind was busy painting the outline of her body. It was as if I had gone blind and she was the only light that filled my hollowed pupils. Her human flesh spread before my imagination, like a canvas of mysteries and beauty, and I was both the wanderer and the outcast, stopping to quench my thirst for beauty on the shores of a river bank. But doomed were my lips not to touch the fresh water stream, and doomed was I to forever behold the one I would have given my soul just to call her mine. Mine... Mine...Mine...

My fingers trembled but never ceased making the strings vibrate, and my song became the song of the sandpiper which finds its freedom in death. She was listening attentively. A thought crossed my mind, a deep buried hope. Perhaps she still remembered. Perhaps, she hasn't forgotten what was once and what shall never be.

"What is that you are holding in your hands, Perseus?" she had asked me one day.

We were both thirteen years of age and free to wander together and play the games of our innocent youth. On that day, however, I had wandered alone through the rocky fields and valleys, and thus I brought with me a sandpiper that I had found on the ground with a broken wing.

"What do you care?" I retorted. "Go and play with the other girls."

She scowled, beaming at me.

"I am the Princess of Ethiopia. I demand complete submission or else...."

"Or else what, feed me to the crocodiles?"

She pinched me, and a sharp pain crossed through my arm. The sandpiper struggled in my hands. I had tightened my grip onto it because of the pain. I relaxed my fingers, and pushed Andromeda away. She lost her balance and fell on the ground. She didn't cry. She never cried. Instead, she stood there, fixing the earth with her gaze. Neither did she speak nor attempted to move. My first reaction was to run away from her and leave the little princess prostrated but undefeated on the ground. But I didn't run away. Something happened in that moment. It was then when the light of the afternoon sun fell upon her, and her black hair shone like heated amber. The colour was fascinating and I found myself getting near to her, wanting to touch the amber tresses. Her voice stopped me.

"Why do you have to be so mean?" she whispered.

I sat down next to her, holding the bird before her eyes, so that she could take a good look.

"It is a sandpiper", I replied. "It is sick. It can no longer fly."

Her eyes rounded with sadness. I remember never having felt keener the desire to comfort someone.

"Don't worry," I promised to her, whispering into her ear. "I'll make it fly again for you."

Don't worry...I will always keep my promise.

The princess ordered the slaves to resume their positions by the bathtub. Like a cat, she descended the few

stairs that were slightly visible under the water. I heard her light steps. I felt their weight against the coldness of the ivory. Her hips were swaying gently amid the veils of whitish vapours that were coming out of the water. Even though my eyes had been sealed by the vow not to look at the princess while she was having her bath, I broke the constricting law. Had she been miles away, I would still have seen her as if she were an inch away from me. My fingers were wildly running upon the strings. It was my music that caused the princess to allow me to stay in the room. I was supposed to play and entertain the atmosphere while Andromeda was bathing, although I was strictly forbidden to even dare rising my eyes to her. But it was impossible to avoid not throwing furtive glances at her.

The harp trembled in my lap while my fingers were trying to take hold once more of the strings. I changed the tune and began singing a love song, and yet it echoed sadly in my heart. A painful pang pierced my heart. Suddenly I felt I did not belong there. I was a stranger, an intruder. Everything was so beautiful and lofty, while I...Well, I am nothing more but the harpist, the slave musician who dreams of freedom and love, and is doomed to mourn in fetters his unrequited feelings. Even the bathtub itself was a true work of art in comparison with my insignificant person. It was shell shaped, spreading across the entire room, while I had donned the gray robe of a slave, and I had no space where to unfold the vastness of my spirit. So sadly to find myself envying the unanimated matter only because it enjoyed the pleasure of my beloved's company. And the water was so clear and mirror-like, spreading aromatic fragrances in the air. The slaves had perfumed the water and scattered wild and exotic flowers. It was all

so luxuriant, so magnificent, and yet, had Andromeda not been there, the opulent royal bath chamber would have appeared poor and devoid of luxury.

A lotus flower, delicate like the ivory mist of dawn, was floating around the royal body. Petals of roses caressed the olive skin, bestowing fragrant kisses upon the hips, shoulders, and upon the swan-like neck. The princess did not observe the roses. Her eyes followed the sway of the lotus flower. When it got near her, she lifted the lotus and carried it to her lips. What roses had done to her body, she was now doing to the lotus. Gentle but firm kisses, the princess hid beneath the white leaves, as if she were kissing not a flower but a lover.

"You are special", she whispered to the lotus. "Although you are born from mud and ugliness, you rise from the bottom of the pond purer and cleaner than the world's finest pearl. And for that I love you."

Then she let the lotus return to the water where it came from. If I were the lotus, I would rather have faded on her lips than to abandon the warmth of her gentle breath.

As if called by my thoughts, she threw me a furtive glance. Our eyes met. She frowned, upset by my audacity, whereas I seemed to look through her and not at her. I turned my gaze away, and as I did that, I knew my inner self was smiling sadly in the mirror of another life. Had I been free, I would have been an eagle and no chains would have held me on earth.

I began another song about a man who was searching for truth, and instead of completing his quest he found the truth of deception. After my song was finished, I looked at her again, while my eyes were crying to her that she was my deception, as well as my truth. The princess

didn't bid me to take my eyes off her as that would have meant my death, but she frowned again. My inner smile had died on my lips, and I lowered my eyes. There was a time when she didn't meet my eyes with a deranged look upon her face, but that was a long time ago.

Andromeda looked around the room, and when her lips did move, it was not my name that she called.

"Lilytha!" she beckoned to one of her slaves.

A dark green-eyed slave answered the call, approaching meekly.

"Yes, my princess Andromeda. What can I do to please you?"

I frowned. I didn't like Lilytha. How dared she besmirch with her traitorous lips the name of her mistress Andromeda? Andromeda...Her name resounded in my soul, like the remembrance of a sacred lullaby. How many times have I not pronounced it at night, with the piety of a priest uttering the holy name of his goddess...How many times have I not cried it loudly in the silence of my slavery condition... I am calling her name right now, only that there are other lips who give life to each letter of her name.

Andromeda thrust proudly her gaze into the eyes of the slave, and Lilytha shivered fearing she had unintentionally wronged her mistress. The princess was capricious and spoiled, and yes, sometimes cruel. I admit and forgive each flaw and each wrong she had ever done to me. Lilytha was also well aware that Andromeda had the temper of a wild adder, and one never knew when she would be gentle or simply mad. Just then, the face of the princess lost its gravity, and Andromeda splashed the girl with water.

"You are very naughty, Lilytha, and that hurts my feelings. I've told you so many times to call me by my

name. Is it so hard? What is this annoying ‘my princess’ that you keep repeating? Please, for the last time, I may be the Princess of Ethiopia, but before you I am Andromeda, your friend and playmate. Or have you forgotten our salad days, a-khot¹?“

The cunning slave faltered. I could see and understand her hesitation. It was not that she had been warned by the slave’s superintended to show the princess the due respect. Lilytha feared that one day the princess would realize what was going on behind her back.

“No, prin ... I mean, Andromeda.”

“You see, it is not so difficult, silly girl.”

Andromeda sprang from the water, throwing her beautiful black and curly hair over the waist that was still girded by wee drops. The sun was bathing the entire room, falling in a shower of rays over the statuary frame of the Ethiopian princess. Immediately, two other slaves with tiny bottles in their hands ran to anoint the royal body. After completing that task, they brought Andromeda a delicate and soft white robe for her to dress. It was made of pure silk which gave the princess a translucent appearance. She looked like a cloud that is formed in the pure oyster of the sky as a glittering and moving pearl.

After having being dressed in a new clean attire Andromeda seated herself on a mattress covered with a palm leaf blanket and bid Lilytha to approach. The latter obeyed the order. The princess took the slave by the hand and invited her to have a seat by her side. Lilytha flushed but didn’t dare to upset her mistress. Andromeda kissed her cheeks and called to the other slaves to play their harps. I noticed the princess hadn’t passed the command to me as well. She was avoiding the only man who had

1 Sister (hebrew)

ever made her soul sing. I know that I wake up something inside of her, because every time I sing, she is different. It is as if she is brought to life from a heavy slumber, and her eyes catch fire. Whereas when others sing, she doesn't even bother to listen, like she is doing now. She called for music, but not a sound stirred her attention. The slave girls obeyed and soon my music was accompanied by their harps, quickly brought to life. In a crescendo of notes, the music resounded in the room like a clamorous sea.

My fingers had ceased their activity long before they started playing their instruments. I could not sing any more. Quitting my shadowy seat; I drew nearer to where the mistress and her slave were standing. I wanted to know how much the princess would disclose to the slave. I feared the day Lilytha would use Andromeda's secrets as weapons against her innocent mistress.

I approached them, holding my silent harp in my arms. Being so deep in secrecy, they did not notice me. Andromeda had lowered her voice and only to the ears of Lilytha did she whisper. With my back glued to a marble pillar, I was standing an inch away from them, and as I have a keen hearing, I perceived their entire conversation.

"I had a dream last night, Lilytha, a most wonderful and peculiar dream which the gods must have sent me. I saw myself, and yet I was not myself. I don't know how to put it for you to understand me, but I looked different. It was as if someone else had possessed my body, yet it was I that my gaze beheld and at the same time a completely different character appeared in the distance of the unknown time and space.

I was wearing strange textiles. Very strange

textiles... I can't describe them to you because I do not have the proper words. Also, I was speaking a different language. I haven't heard anyone speak it before so I am clueless to what people does the language belong. Perhaps, it doesn't belong to any people at all and my soul painted it on the canvas of my imagination. It happens sometimes, both the king's and the queen's nights are often disturbed by odd fancies.

And there was something about the land and the weather. It was not warm like here, in our country. I was so cold. I have never felt like that. There was no grass growing from the ground, and no earth at all. In fact, I have never seen that type of soil, dazzlingly white and soft, crunching beneath my feet, which were covered up to the knee in some warm and resilient piece of clothes. Perhaps, it was the snow my father often talked about, but I wouldn't know. My eyes have never rested upon the beauty of the Northern Countries. But, Lilytha, what most impressed upon my mind and soul, it was a feeling of complete loneliness. How lonely was I, my beloved friend, how lonely and miserable... Neither Perseus, the slave, was there to play his harp in comfort; neither Pegasus was there to stand by my side and breathe his fiery air in my cheek, nor you to prattle and divert my thoughts. Then I realized the General was nowhere near me. Frantically, I began to look for him. I needed so badly to tell him something."

Andromeda blushed, but Lilytha pretended not to notice.

"How I called Cetus by name, but only the savage wind blew into my face its mocking laughter. I kept calling, although I knew not whom I was calling. The horror that filled my soul with awe, when I realized I

couldn't recall the General's features, was unbearable. I failed to tell him the truth. Lilytha, I haven't loved any one as much as I love him, and I love him not because he is the most handsome or honest or the strongest, I love him because I must love him. I know I must. This unwritten law has been embedded into my being by my own free will. From all the men, it was him I singled out. And I couldn't tell the General how I felt. He had disappeared before learning the truth."

"But, Andromeda, General Cetus knows you love him."

Andromeda blushed even more powerful than before, but didn't utter a word.

A smile flew over my lips. For one splitting second, I thought she might be speaking about me, about not being able to tell Cetus the truth about her true feelings which didn't involve him, but then it couldn't be. The smile spread broader on my face, and my eyes lowered trying to hide the sadness under the mask of gaiety. I was looking around myself, realizing I was in a chamber filled with dancing slave women and harpists or lute players. They were having fun, reveling in each other's company. And unlike them, I could only think about her words. No, she can't love Cetus, she simply can't. She loves because she must, not because she feels that within her being a mysterious fire has been started by a greater force than the human mind's poor understanding.

And Cetus doesn't see you for who you are, Andromeda. Unlike me, he observes only the princess, while I observe the soul with which I meet so often in thoughts and feelings; and moreover, he can never make your soul sing the way my harp brings you joy. And you don't love him. I know you don't. You are just fooling yourself, trying to run away from your true self. But I

know you, Andromeda. You can't fool me. I will always see you for who you are.

The feet of the dancers swayed on the floor, and dangling jingling bracelets filled the air with mirth and melodious laughter. I only saw her, I only heard her. The other noises were just faint echoes of a different world. Soon Andromeda concluded her confession.

"I am happy, Lilytha, happy just to know he's close. I could live without addressing him the word, and I'd be happy knowing that my heart speaks only to him. But the thought of losing him pierces my senses, like the apprehension of a death-in-life sentence."

"But you're not going to lose your General, prin... Andromeda."

A red tinge of annoyance passed over Andromeda's face. Lilytha didn't seem to observe. She was sheepishly looking at the dancing slaves around her. Silence ensued, as the princess observed the damp stare of the slave. Lilytha couldn't understand love. Her heart had never been touched by the loftiest of human feelings. The princess sighed.

"Oh, I wish you understood my heart but you don't."

"But, I do, Andromeda. I do understand. It is normal to fear your lover could be taken away from you. Your union still depends on the king's consent."

"You don't understand, Lilytha", said Andromeda sadly. "It is plainly written on your face. But I don't blame you. Only when you have loved at least a quarter as I love now, you will be able to understand me."

Andromeda bowed her head to the inevitable, as if down at her feet a gulf had opened its hungry maw, and now she was beholding the monstrosity of the bottomless

pit. Something lurked in the darkness of the unknown, waiting to devour her entire being. And the abyss kept opening before her, lest she should fall into, although she would never let herself slip of the safety boundaries of her royal etiquette. Meanwhile, silence had divided the mistress from the slave. The stillness of the moment laid its leaden shadow between a woman who wanted to confess her feelings and another woman who seemed not to understand, but the awkward moment didn't last for long, and soon Andromeda raised her beautiful eyes and addressed to Lilytha.

"What do you think, Lilytha? Do you consider my dream to be a sign from the gods? Am I to lose Cetus?" Andromeda's voice almost seemed cheerful now.

Lilytha, who had listened attentively, nodded ominously her dark head.

"My mind is poor and unworthy to see into the future, but even if my eyes pierced the veils of the unknown, I would only see what the gods allow me to see. One thing I know for sure and that is the certainty that the will of Fate leads us all towards our preordained path, and every dream has a mysterious meaning which will be revealed at the right moment."

The slave spoke wisely. Even Andromeda understood the meaning of her words. Feeling her chest heavy, the princess closed her eyes. The music of the harp floated around the room like the fluttering of a swan in its majestic flight, and the fragrance of the rose petals brought forward visions of lofty gardens suspended in the air by invisible strings. She opened again her eyelids. Then our eyes met again. She saw me and blushed. This time, I turned my head around, while my hands were again running across the strings of my instrument. But I

knew she realized that I heard everything. Nevertheless, not a word of remorse did she cast me. Instead, she urged her slave girl to leave.

"Lilytha, thank you for lending me your ear! Now go and tell the stable man to saddle Pegasus. I feel like riding with the wind and clear my mind. Go."

The slave girl bowed and departed, leaving her mistress alone and at the same time so close to me, yet so distant.

"Your song is sad, musician", she addressed me.

"You are not listening attentively", I retorted as the song I was then playing had a cheerful tune.

"Yes, indeed, you are right, eavesdropping is not my specialty."

I pretended not to notice the remark. She resumed her talk.

"When I said your song is sad, I didn't mean this song", her voice lowered. "I meant the song you sang when I entered the bath."

"I sing many songs. It's hard to keep the count."

"Don't mock me, Perseus. You know very well what song I have referred to."

"Do I? Since when a slave thinks like his mistress?"

"Since when am I your mistress? You never obey my orders."

"You are free to feed me to the crocodiles and get yourself a better slave."

"Perhaps, I will."

She threw me an angry look. But she wasn't the only one who had a bad disposition at that moment. I attempted to stand up and leave but she blocked my way. Without a hesitation, she caught me by the arm and forced me to stay.

"Why don't you say anything?" she asked, shaking

me.

"Let go off me."

"Not until you answer."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Forget it!" she cried indignantly and let go of my arm.

The light of the burning torches were kindling her hair. The same amber tresses shone in the light, resurrected from the lingering memory of the past. I knew that she remembered. I smiled and she saw my smile. We looked into each other's eyes, and clouded in silence our souls were unfolding the veils of a distant existence when we were only a boy and a girl.

"I promise I will make it fly again."

The sandpiper was feebly fluttering his healthy wing, holding still the injured one.

Her eyes rested with hope upon me.

"Do you think it will fly again?"

"Of course, I do."

"What makes you say that?"

I blushed, groping for the adequate words.

"Do you not trust me?"

Andromeda smiled assured.

"What has happened to him?" she inquired.

I told her how I found the little sandpiper on my lonely strolling on the rocky fields. It couldn't fly and I took pity on the helpless orphan which like me was facing alone the mighty world. If I hadn't taken it, a hawk would certainly have prayed on him. I had returned with the sandpiper to the palace and showed it to Andromeda because I wanted to offer her something...something of mine.

"Are you sure I can have it?" she asked.

We were walking side by side in the Royal

Orchard. The sun was gently setting, and her hair had the appearance of velvety amber.

"The sandpiper is yours."

From that day on, Andromeda and I took great care of our feathery companion. Especially Andromeda spent a lot of time, talking and fondling the bird. She was fascinated by our new friend.

"Don't you worry, birdie," she kept talking to the bird. "You will fly again. Perseus will provide you with new wings."

Soon our efforts gave results. The sandpiper was slowly but surely recovering. When the wing was entirely mended, the bird grew restless, chirping loudly in its cage. One of the older slaves advised us to release the bird because the sandpiper can't survive in captivity. Longing for its freedom, it would rather pierce its chest with its beak than live in a cage. I would have released it but Andromeda refused to believe the story.

"We simply can't leave the poor bird by itself. It will die. We need to make sure that we have indeed fixed its wings. You have promised to make it fly again."

She kept repeating this, and so the sandpiper stayed with us in a cage that she herself had requested from the king for her bird. Things went well for a while and then everything changed. Hardly had a fortnight passed by when we found the sandpiper dead in its cage. The bird's chest had been pierced by the sharp beak. It had killed himself just like the older slave said it would do. For the first time Andromeda cried a lot, and I tried in vain to comfort her. She pushed me aside, blaming me for not keeping my word. No matter what I had to say in my defense, she was deaf and blind. And she went on sobbing and sobbing till her face got swollen.

"I understand the sandpiper," I told her when she

was calmer. "I would have done just like him hadn't been for you."

She looked into my eyes and again tears came into her dark pupils.

"You are not living in a cage and neither have you suffered any injury."

"It's not like that."

"Show me then," she challenged me.

"Show you what?"

"Show me how it's like."

I rose from the cushion I was sitting beside her. There was a tablet in her room and a lump of charcoal. I took the tablet and returned to my seat. Deftly, my fingers drew what looked like the Royal Palace. She was watching me attentively. I knew she found very hard to believe that there could be one single person unhappy in Ethiopia.

"This is my cage", I said when I finished. "Although no harm has been done to me, I am not free."

Sadness filled her soul.

"You know I cannot free you, don't you?"

"I know", I nodded. "Only the king can free me."

"And if one day the king decides to free you...."

The question died on her lips.

"I would not go."

"Even if you are not happy living in the palace?"

Her whole fragile girlish body trembled, waiting for my answer.

"You make me happy" I said almost inaudible.

She blushed and kissed my cheek.

"I forgive you, Perseus", she whispered into my ear. "And you will keep your promise. You are going to make the sandpiper fly again."

"How will I do that? The bird is dead."

"No, it's not. It will live on in our memory. Whenever you sing his story, the sad bird will fly again. It will come back to us."

And thus I sang. A second later the shadow of the sandpiper had fled by, leaving no trace behind. But now, after ten years, it has returned. The sandpiper was again hovering over us, over our twain memories, and over our souls.

"I don't want you to be sad", she whispered.

"I am not sad anymore", I replied curtly.

"But you were sad. Why is that? Have you been wronged by someone or have I been a cruel mistress?"

"Sometimes, sadness burdens the mind and soul of a man, like a mystery which seals with a leaden siege the lips meant to confess their woe."

"Today, you are speaking in riddles, musician."

"Life itself is a riddle."

She seemed again upset by my answers. However, I remained silent until Lilytha returned to announce that Pegasus had been harnessed. I felt her eyes hovering over me, searching to read something in my countenance. My face was impenetrable. I kept playing my harp until she left the room. Then the music stopped and no harp was heard. Still, there were still the other harps and lutes and the dancing that went on, like a never-ending procession of ghouls. Unnoticed, I crept outside. Andromeda had mounted Pegasus, the horse I helped to be brought in this world when his mother, the pearl-white mare, gave him birth. I tamed him, and I was the one who first rode on his back. And indeed, this horse has been my gift for her. Just like the sandpiper...

The evening grew colder, but I didn't feel the chillness of the coming night. I was running nimbly to keep up with her, and sometimes I had to hide behind trees or to throw myself flat to the ground, lest she would discover me. Andromeda was riding across the green meadows. Her white dress fluttered like huge wings; so that whoever saw her thought that the princess was riding a winged white stallion which had just descended from the sky.

But the end of the journey was getting nearer than ever. I recognized the place. When the beautiful rider came closer to a little orange grove, Andromeda dismounted and propped Pegasus from a tree. Her hand caressed the mane and the long nimble neck of the horse. The horse neighed and shook his head. His nostrils were foaming fire.

"How much you resemble Perseus! Your gallop is like a song I never seem to understand, although I feel its vigor and beauty. Wait here, my friend. I'll be back soon."

The horse looked into his mistress' eyes and neighed slightly. The princess turned around and walked ahead. Was she smiling with anticipation at the sweet encounter with her paramour? I was trying hard to get a good view but the branches were heavy with fruit. Nevertheless, I didn't see any trace of serenity. Her face was expressionless, like that of a marble statue that cares not if her master comes or not to admire its beauty. She always smiled when she met me. Yes, we were kids, but her smile was always there, impressed on her lips. For me...Now she smiled no more.

I followed her further into the grove. He was there, a heartbeat away. I knew. I had seen him before in this

forest. Cetus practiced his military exercises in a little gully near the Plain of Sharon. It was his favourite spot, far from the agitation of the city. As a general commanding the king's army, Cetus had proved more than once his courage and war craft. He had the courage to kill and spill blood, and he owned the craft of handling his sword with the cruelty of a war lord. Nevertheless, he himself was conquered by an arrow swifter than any spear and lance. The moment he had seen Andromeda, he felt within his soul the rapture of an unknown spring wavering its streams towards the mysterious shores of fate. He saw the princess that would make him a king. Cetus knew it was a love doomed to end in tragedy, since she was a princess and he a general, a merely soldier, unfit to crown her with jewels and place a kingdom before her feet, but that did not make him love her less. Yes, love her, because in his selfish desire for power, he loved her as a means to an end. Moreover, he failed to understand her soul. If he had any warm and genuine feeling for her, he would have known that Andromeda didn't want precious gems and political power, nor to rule over Ethiopia. She only claimed the right to grasp happiness and have a pleasant company by her side. I know her heart as I know mine. That is why it is so hard for me to understand the reason why she picked him. Far from catching the eye, he also has a questionable character which makes him disagreeable.

This array of sad thoughts was passing through my mind. He would be happy if she were the throne of Ethiopia itself, while I only coveted the light from her eyes whenever we were together. Yes, we were together, even if separated by caste and distance, I was always in her shadow, meeting with her in the one glance she accidentally let it fall on me.

"Your eyes shine like blue sapphires when they reflect the light of joy, and they are green when the shadows hide the day in their cape of darkness", like in a dream she would tell me.

I could see myself laughing, while passing playfully my fingers through her hair.

"Because they reflect the sapphire of my soul which is now smiling before me," I would reply, basking in the sun of her merriment and pleasure, "and the twilight of my nights spent in dreaming about you."

Andromeda pressed her lips gently upon my eyebrows. They were thick and scarlet like a rough fire line. Her lips went down and kissed my eyes. But no, there weren't my eyes. They were the other man's who was now standing by her side, while I was hiding nearby.

"I wish I were not a princess and you were not a general", I heard her saying to him. "Then we could have been friends."

"I want to be more than friends," he hissed into her ear. She seemed not to notice. Her blank gaze was travelling far away, searching hungrily in the horizon.

"Everything would have been so simple if I hadn't been a princess. Sometimes I dream I am a simple girl and you were there by my side."

"I am now by your side", he interrupted her again.

"I keep imagining it...How beautiful would have been if we had been born free to choose the right path for us. I envy the simple life of the fishermen or the mountaineers. I wish we were poor, you a fisherman, and I your wife. We would live in a cozy hut on the West Bank of the Jordan River and feed our hunger with fish and quench our thirst with simple water. And I would be the happiest woman alive because I would have all the wealth

in the world, you.A-ta...a-ta...²" she repeated frantically.
"I would stay by your side while you play your harp."

My heart started pounding in my chest.

"Softly, my fingers would play in your hair, and despite the fishy smell you would take them to your lips."

"Like this?" asked Cetus, trying to seize her fingers and take them to his lips, but she snatched her hand away.

"You would play the story of the sandpiper as I listen to the voice within, and in the distance of time and space, the bird will find his wind and fly to freedom."

"What are you talking about? What sandpiper? I don't even know how to play the harp."

"And you would play for me", she feverishly continued. "You promised to make the sandpiper fly."

One hot tear rolled from her eyes, and my front leaned against the solid bark. Everything was spinning around me. All this time...All these years...

"Do you know how to play the harp?" she asked Cetus. "I love its music. How it makes my soul sing... My song, my most precious song, you fill my being and complete me," she frantically entreated. "Sing to me the quake of the earth and the mad fury of the waves. I don't need the serenity of royal happiness. I want the thunder and lightning of the gods."

He looked at her in awe, confused by the new Andromeda who was standing in front of him. She seemed different, changed. When Cetus tried to embrace her, she avoided his touch.

"What is going on with you?" he sounded exasperated.

"Cetus", she turned to give him a harsh but decided look. "I've tried. The Gods are my witnesses. I've tried, but you can't make my soul sing."

2 You (masc., hebrew)

"By the fury of the underworld, what is this nonsense?" he thundered. He clutched her in a firm grip. She struggled to escape.

"Let her go", I yelled, leaving my hiding place.

Her eyes met mine in terror and she tried to speak to me but Cetus' heavy palm fell over her face. Fury seized me and I threw myself at him. We fought, but unfortunately I was no match for a skilled general. Andromeda tried to intervene, but he pushed her to the ground. I was soon defeated. He gave a long whistle and several of his men ran to obey his orders. He had me tied to the bark of a tree, and after his men left the area, Cetus roared with laughter pulling Andromeda closer.

"How dare you?" she madly yelled at him. "I am the princess of Ethiopia. I will tell my father about your conduct. Release me and Perseus, immediately."

He roared louder. A putrid hatred was gnawing at my loins. I wished to annihilate him, to tear him into pieces, but not for the pain he had caused me, but for having disgraced Andromeda.

"You can tell your father what you please, and I too will tell him how I caught you bedding a slave."

"You liar", she screamed in fury.

"Tell me now, my pretty; am I making your soul sing?"

And he sang to her the accursed melody of his lips as they passionately touched the olive skin of the beautiful princess, of my beautiful one. I tried to release myself, but the ropes had strongly coiled around my body. The ropes cut my cheeks and my lips, leaning against the wall of teeth that tried to bite and cut the rough folds.

You fool, I silently yelled at him, my mouth being gagged; I could have sung her the colours of eternity and

not the fleeting moment of a kiss in time and space. If only she had allowed me...If only she had told me sooner.

My fingers clawed the bark of the orange tree until splinters of wood remained stuck behind the nails. I did not want to see her with him, but neither did I want him to hurt her. And I had known he did not love her. I had seen him kissing Lilytha and other slaves, while Andromeda was not with him. And I tried to tell her, but she refused to believe me and accused me of being jealous, while I only wanted her to be happy. If she could not love me, at least she should give her heart to a worthy man, but not to Cetus. Not to a man who would betray her as soon as opportunity arose. And to this man, Andromeda had been running to. Like a wife hurrying to greet her husband, so did she, being no longer a princess but a woman who compelled herself to be in love. And now after embracing the truth, she had put herself in danger.

"You see, puppy," Cetus mockingly hurled the words to me, "love bears the same power as death, joining all mortals in equality."

Provided it was true love, I added in my mind.

Andromeda kept fighting to keep Cetus at a distance. Tired, he yawned and let her go.

"Women", he muttered between his teeth. "I'll see you tomorrow, my gazelle."

"In your dreams, perhaps".

He didn't bother to answer and he passed by me as if I was invisible. The moment we were alone, Andromeda ran to me, fighting to untie me. After long efforts, I was released. We didn't say anything to each other. She was embarrassed and I was at a loss of words.

The day was approaching its end, and the feeble sun rays grew dimmer, subsiding into the reddish hue

of the twilight. The first stars of the night appeared from beneath the screen of the passing clouds, illumining like vivid torches the path of our human hearts. We were walking through the forest, I holding Pegasus' reins, and she following me submissively. In my chest still beat the heart of a watchman unable to cut the ties that bind him to the secret duty of watching over his most valuable assets. The Evening Star seemed to bow before the princess of Ethiopia, bestowing upon her the sacred light of nocturnal mysteries. And Andromeda kept walking by my side; seeing neither the sky above, nor the branches of the rustling trees which swayed in the breeze. But her thoughts stormed inside her mind, like firebirds darting through mazes of twisted corridors and halls.

The branches' gnarled leafy fingers caressed our shadows, keeping pace with us. The shadow of the wanderer had tied our fate. Wanderer... She was wandering down a dangerous road, a beautiful dangerous road.

"How much have you heard from what I told Cetus?" she asked me.

"Enough."

"Why did you follow me?"

"Because I don't trust Cetus."

"I am glad you've come, and I am glad you've heard everything."

"So am I."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want to return to the palace", she fiercely said, turning to me.

I looked her in the eyes.

"Even if your run away from home will cause pain to your parents?"

My question upset her and reduced her to silence.

"Andromeda... Andromeda..."

I caught her chin into my hands and forced her to look at me.

"If you want, I will stay forever with you in this forest. You just have to say the word."

She lowered her head, and I understood.

Just then, the spell was broken by the sound of hooves running into our direction. There were soldiers calling the princess, and we also heard the worried voice of the king himself. The princess quickly embraced me.

"Go, hide yourself!" she commanded me.

"I am not leaving you."

"This is an order, Perseus."

"I don't like orders."

"Not even my orders?"

"Are you ashamed of being seen with me?"

"I want you to be safe."

"I am only safe with you."

The horse riders were getting closer.

"Please, Perseus."

"Are you sure?"

"Go!"

The soldiers accompanying the king were getting nearer and nearer.

"I am here", she called them.

The stars seemed motionless and so far away, as the king's silhouette appeared mounted on his black stud. Andromeda had ceased dreaming awake of happiness and simple life. She turned around to face her father. I hid myself carefully, cursing my folly of whispering her name. I heard King Cepheus' glad voice as he dismounted to embrace his daughter.

"Where have you been?"

"I have been riding Pegasus."

"I was afraid. General Cetus came in a hurry, crying that he spotted you in the forest with a slave."

Andromeda's fists clenched tightly to her father's arm.

"General Cetus was wrong. He must have confounded me with someone else."

"But still what happened to your lip?"

Andromeda realised that her lip was still a little swollen after Cetus' blow.

"I was stung by a bee."

"You should be more careful. I had gone mad only thinking that something bad might have happened to you."

"Don't you worry, father, there is always someone to watch my back."

"There is no one besides us here."

The king looked at her astonished.

"You can't see it. It's like a spirit..." Andromeda paused, trying to remember something, and then the word from her dream came softly. "Angel..."

"What?" asked the king.

"Angel", she repeated. "I have a guardian angel."

"What is an angel? A new God?"

"In a way..."

And a sharp laughter echoed sinisterly across the forest.

"Strange birds must be hiding in this grove", the king said, shivering, and he and Andromeda mounted their horses, ridding back home. After they took a few strides away, I followed their traces.

The voice that called Andromeda, that tall silhouette glued to the bark of a tree remained unknown.

Later, when the princess was deeply sleeping, another mysterious apparition greeted her dreams. Andromeda shuddered. For a splitting second, she thought she had recognized his voice, as no voice resembled to the one she always heard echoing in her memory and thoughts.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Do you not recognize me? Do you not see the vestiges of my royalty? Just like you, I am a prince."

"Then why can't I see your face clearly? Am I dreaming?"

The man who had hidden himself behind a tree, laughed maliciously. And soon he stepped into the dim light.

He smiles and she feels compelled to smile back. He steps forward and she steps towards him. It is a dance of bodies and souls, a dance of the immortals that will never cease. Thus it was and thus it would always be.

"You wanted to hear the thunder of gods? Don't you know that only I can play it?"

His strong arms wrapped themselves around her waist, and she placed her hands on his chest. They were two and they were one. And thus it would always be.

The cry of a bird pierced the night. It was the mighty call of triumph. The king of the sky, the eagle was hovering over the earth, in a last flight of that day. The bird of prey would soon ascend to the summit of the mountain where a nest awaits its arrival. The eagle knows not about the problems of the earth, and the earth knows not the true happiness of freedom, and the bliss of a wish a heart makes.

Andromeda sadly sighed as her visions of living free in the forest faded away. She didn't know who she was anymore. The strange prince kissed her forehead, and

she closed her eyes. The shadows of last night's dream passed over her, but she banished every bad memory to the realm of oblivion. She wanted only to feel and taste the presence of another human being. It was a feeling she had no words to describe. She had never wished more to be utterly and profoundly loved by someone, and this was a truth more powerful than a thousand odd dreams. The prince ought to love her as much as she tried to love him back, and no matter what her father said, she would marry no man but the prince. Strangely, she was wrapped in his arms, and still she was standing far away. From behind the bark of an orange tree, Andromeda read the determination on her other self's face.

Soon the sky shone under the burden of the night. The coverlet of darkness had spread above the black marble of the heathen temple of stars and nocturnal mist. Like bacchants, the stars jumped with glee and danced, at the same time praying for the life of man on earth. The strange pair was now sitting on the grass, watching wistfully the flickering of nocturnal sky; while the veins of a vigorous river that run nearby crept under the earth which sustained the embraced human form. Resting her body in the embrace of her beloved, Andromeda felt herself to be a star, a part of that incomprehensible mystery.

"So you have decided to tell your father?"

His voice thundered, echoing far into the distance.

"Do you fear for my life or for yours alone?"

"I fear nothing in this world", he answered. "But I will be furious if you choose a slave or a petty general over a prince."

"But I love Per..."

"Hush, you despicable creature... What do you know about love? That little ticking container of yours

doesn't have the capacity of holding love inside."

"You are wrong, and I don't like your tone."

He laughed. With his cold fingers, he drew circles over her forehead.

"Do you give up on Perseus?"

"Yes. But my father still wants me to marry Phineus."

"It only matters what I want."

"Yes," came the boldly answer. "I will never consent to marry my uncle Phineus. I belong to you, body and soul, and no one on this earth, has the right to claim me his own."

Perseus's voice passed through her like an inner gust of wind that only she could feel. "Liar...Liar...I am accusing her of lying in front of all nature, and in God's presence as well."

"Swear you will love no other girl but me when we grow up."

The voice of a little girl echoed through the forest.

From the spot Andromeda had remained in the shadows, watching her other self abandoning to the prince's power, she could feel another presence. Slowly, she now turned towards her memory.

Perseus tried not to laugh. They were both hiding in the greenhouse. She had run away from the slave nurse who had attempted to force her to go to bed. Andromeda never liked being told what to do, and on that night she didn't want to go to sleep. She had run straight to her boy companion, urging him to follow without delay. He had come with her, following her like a faithful dog. The boy didn't know what she wanted to tell him, but most surely he hadn't expected to hear those words. She was serious and he had to bite his tongue not to laugh. A sharp pain contorted his face as she caught his arms in a firm grip.

"If you don't tell the truth, the gods of the sandy desert will punish you. You'll forever wander away from the Valley of the Kings, without finding the red rose of bliss."

A faint trace of sadness spread across his face, and she noticed it.

"What is the matter with you? Tell me plainly. You don't love me, do you?"

"How can you ask me something like this? And there is nothing wrong with me," Perseus lied. He couldn't tell her the real reason so he ended up by confessing her a different truth.

"It's just it pains me even to imagine you're thinking that I could love another human being more than I already love you. There is only you, and there is no end to love."

Beaming, she kissed his lips and quickly ran away, leaving the boy behind. It had been their first kiss. The slave boy stood there rooted on the spot. The last image Perseus saw that night was her white nightgown fluttering on her trail, like a dream's silvery veil. He watched her disappearing from his view until there was nothing left of her.

"I have never broken my oath", Andromeda whispered to the silence of the surrounding night. "I have never loved anyone the way I love you."

The cry thundered across the Plain of Sharon.

"Interesting memory", the strange prince laughed with mirth. He was no longer embracing the other Andromeda. He was now beholding the real Andromeda.

But she didn't hear his histrionic laughter. And now her lips were touching other lips than Perseus. The prince kissed her and she let herself to be kissed, not

knowing that the man's kiss was bearing the burden of unspoken restlessness and fear for his plans.

"Why can't she see the snake? She takes the cobra for a lion when in fact he is only a spiteful deceiver."

From within, Andromeda warned her spell bound self about the dangers of one night's kiss.

His maliciousness disgusted her, and that night, in a dream, Andromeda knew that there would come a time when Perseus would have to fight to protect her, to save the princess from the rage of her father, the king of Ethiopia, from Cetus, and from the unknown forces, the greedy so called prince who kept hissing in her ear.

V

Several days had passed since Uriah first discovered the manuscript. And now he was facing another difficult trial. Cutting all human ties and turning his back to the life he was accustomed to, was definitely not an easy thing to do. He kept analysing the issue over and over again, regretting not having spent more time talking about it with his father. Questions like "Will I succeed?" or "Am I on the right track?" haunted him day and night. Soon he could no longer sleep. He would only lie on his bed, with his eyes shut, pretending to rest, when in fact he avoided falling asleep. However, running away from his dreams while sleeping meant thinking about them while being awake. And this situation went on and on.

Sleep didn't come to Uriah the night before his departure, and neither peace kissed his brow. An unfathomable restlessness ran through his veins, and filled his soul with awe. He couldn't understand why he had that dream where the beautiful unknown woman was an Ethiopian princess and he was her slave. Everything felt so real, so vivid; even when he had plunged into her dream, he had accurately experienced her emotions, as if he had access to her thoughts or as if they shared the same soul... He even had the impression that if he suddenly closed his eyes, the reality he knew would disappear and he would only wake up to a completely different existence. Uriah shuddered. No, he shouldn't make a big deal out of it. He

was just tired and he needed a break, a fresh new start. Besides, it was just a dream, and he had urgent matters on his head. If he couldn't sleep anymore, he'd better occupy his time. He got up and turned on his lamp. A diffuse and yellowish light fell from the bed table on the floor. He checked the time. It was half past two a.m. Time was fast slipping away. He recalled the objects he was taking along, lest he forgot something. No, he had taken great care to have everything ready for the following day.

When he had finished packing, the clock was already pointing past midnight. And he wasn't asleep. Like an automaton, he had put on his pajamas and gone to bed. But he had tossed and tossed like a fish on the dry land of insomnia until he gave up. Not that he was afraid. No. He had been waiting all his life for such an opportunity of change. He had dreamt and longed for adventure, for escaping into the great unknown. Not finding the thrill of excitement in reality, he had searched for it in books. But that did not seem real enough for his physical senses. A book satisfies only the imagination, but doesn't fill all the roomy and endless spaces of the soul. And the prolonged suffering, the manner he tormented himself with the decoding of his father's manuscript... And he succeeded. The secrets of God's creation are only one step away from his reach. And he would be the one who saved mankind. Of course, after sacrificing himself, he would no longer be Uriah Reed. He would only be a vessel, but his being, filled with memories and feeling, would suddenly fall asleep, never to awake. But the saddest part of all was that no one would ever miss him. Well, perhaps Gabriel Archer would miss him, but nevertheless, he would not be missed and longed for as he would have been had he got a family of his own.

No, now is not the time to regret my marital status.

He got up from his bed, put on his slippers and went into the dining room where his father's portrait hung suspended above the fireplace. The dark profile and haughty gaze of the man who had once been his father filled Uriah with an indescribable pride. He was the son of the man who envisioned God's presence in the world of men.

The eyes of the flesh and blood man met with the painted eyes of the man from the canvas. One was alive; the other was just a representation. Nevertheless, they recognized each other. The son was meeting with his father across the boundaries of life.

"I've done it, father", Uriah slowly whispered, trying to find the right words. "I am ready to become the Vessel. Tomorrow, at dawn, I am leaving for Palestine. I will get there to the Garden of Eden."

The man on the canvas seemed to glow with pride, as if one last sparkle had lighted up in his painted frame. The son shuddered, and looked around the room, secretly expecting to see Mr. James Reed entering the room. Nothing happened, and the silence of the night was only outrun by the violent shaking of the branches whose shadows fell like sharp claws over the closed windows.

Uriah shrugged and once again looked at his father's portrait.

"I only wonder if Eden is on earth, isn't only right to assume that Hell is also here on Earth? Perhaps, I am destined to find them both. What if the space I am about to enter is a passageway to Hell? The serpent lived in the biblical Eden and he was evil. I wonder what else is still living there; and more precisely, whether it is good or evil."

And then a treacherous thought crossed his mind, torturing his reason because of the possibility of it being true.

"What if the serpent is the Vessel?"

Whether it was the fancy of Uriah's exalted mind or not, but the portrait seemed to have fallen into a deep thought. It no longer glowed with pride. Mr. James Reed seemed to have retreated into the distant sphere of the universal consciousness.

"No, father...The serpent could not have been the Vessel. God would never entrust His soul to evil. I just have to search the right places. Soon... very soon I will know."

Uriah stopped talking and blinked hardly, then rubbed his eyes. His fancy was again taking control. It must have been a figment of his imagination due to his sleepless prolonged activity. However, he did see something or, better said, thought he saw. The figure of a woman had passed like a shadow over the canvas, but the portrait of his father didn't stir from its immobility. Uriah was startled; and the more he thought about it, the more he envisioned that night's dream.

"Who is she?" he asked himself.

He had seen her crossing the street. By the time he managed to visualize all her features, she had disappeared in the crowd. And then the strange dream he had...In the dream her face was clearly outlined. Even if he closed his eyes, he could still have recalled each contour, each feature, or facial mood. Uriah's heart gave a violent throb and then a grave silence fell over the room. Only the dark painted figure seemed to tremble in the blue light of the moon whose rays had penetrated through the window. But Uriah sighed deeply. He wished he were a boy again,

a youth full of hope, and not an old bachelor who like an harlequin of fate started on a quest only fit for younger souls. Would he prove himself worthy of being God's Vessel? But then he was not that old, he tried to comfort himself. Only 37...There might still be a place for him where he could find hope. Or maybe everything is a lie, a game of chances and hazard.

Turning away from the portrait, he seated himself in an armchair, pensive and silent. From the following day on his life would change. At least he would not be alone as he was taking Gabriel Archer along. They have been friends for so many years. It is only normal they join their forces into one last adventure. Nevertheless, Uriah couldn't restrain a treacherous thought. Is it wise? Can Eternity be revealed to man? But what does Eternity mean? What does await them in Palestine? Is it falsehood, deception or immensurable bliss? Has the Garden of Eden truly existed? Will he find God or will he find the Devil instead?

And the night passed silently like a cat on a hot roof, giving no answer, no solace. And the sun drove again his chariot of fire over the horizon, while the moon in her gauzy dress glided on the sky until she faded away, and light followed darkness. And everything came into place, although nothing was ever going to be the same again.

When Mr. Archer arrived at his friend's house, Uriah was already dressed and ready. He opened the door and greeted his friend in a polite manner. There was nothing in Uriah Reed that recalled the frantic state of his last condition of spirit. Sober, in a perfect order of body and soul, Uriah showed neither excitement, nor enthusiasm. Gabriel was not surprised at all by this sudden change,

because for Mr. Archer that was not practically a change but a restoration of facts. Now Uriah was behaving just like himself.

They didn't exchange too many words, just small chat. Helped by Gabriel, Uriah carried his luggage to Mr. Archer's car. Everything was neatly polished from boot to leather. The car looked old and shaggy like a heap of metallic rubbish, but Mr. Archer loved his roaring baby, and for no car in the world would he have exchanged it. Old attachments are hard to break. Uriah also loved that car and jestingly he had dubbed it 'Queeny', thus bestowing upon it a majestic and endearing light.

The two men stepped inside the vehicle, and Queeny's doors split the air like a shriek cry of a stray cuckoo fallen from its nest. The engine roared hoarsely, coughing thick circles of black smoke, but the car sprang forth venturing into the chillness of the morning. As they passed by the library where Uriah and Gabriel both worked, the former librarian woke up in Uriah who cast back a mournful glance towards what it had been his sanctuary. He was feeling sorry for the books he had left in the custody of the new librarian. But he couldn't have done otherwise.

I promise not to fail in my duty. May all the knowledge pass on to the new librarian, and may he prove himself a better guardian!

Gabriel also sighed since he feared his own job would no longer await for him on his arrival. But be it God's will! It is not time for regrets.

As the car drove swiftly, passing by drugstores and public houses, leaving behind hospitals and local schools, the two travelers felt a sense of estrangement. They were being uprooted from their home by their own personal

will, and at that moment, nothing could have changed the situation.

Uriah opened one of his bags and pulled out a notebook and a pen. A second later, he was busy taking notes.

"What are you doing?" asked Gabriel with curiosity. "Are you making a will or something?"

Uriah laughed.

"Are you afraid I may not include you in it?"

"Something like that."

The reply came promptly.

"Don't you worry, my friend, you'll get everything."

"Well, I was hoping to get you back with me, in London." Gabriel sounded sadder.

"In a way I will come back. Look, I am keeping a journal of our voyage. I think it is important for the history of mankind to learn everything about the discovery of the hidden mysteries of this universe."

"Why don't you advertize our journey into the newspaper? It would ensure the quick discovery of what we are up to! And who knows, maybe others will volunteer to become Vessels too."

"My friend, I am not shouting the truth to the world."

"Why not? I guess everybody has the right to know, from the toddler who barely learns how to spell mama or dada to the grown up who sits in front of the TV with a can of beer in his lap. We're all in this together, Uriah. It is only you who refuse to see that you are not alone."

"Not everybody is a member of the Order of The Wooden Cross, Gabriel..."

"Give me a break. I am sick and tired of hearing about this order. We are all God's children."

Uriah gave Gabriel a sympathetic smile.

"I am also a Guardian of Knowledge. Even you must acknowledge that few are ready to take such a burden on them. And as we have already decided, it is important for the following Vessel to have access to my knowledge."

Gabriel frowned. He was not so confident as his friend. Even now he feared they were going on a wild goose chase. But he didn't say any other word of discouragement. He had chosen to believe not in the idea of Eternity on earth, a thought which he considered absurd and impossible, but in his friend's dream. Yes, it was a beautiful dream, a noble dream, a phantasm that made his friend happy and gave a purpose to his life. And that was everything that Gabriel needed to know.

Uriah kept writing, while Gabriel was driving. He hadn't mentioned a thing about that strange dream to his friend. Somehow, he felt the need to conceal it, even to forget it. That manner it would always be his, even if buried in the deep strata of the unconscious. His secret... the secret he had mastered and thrown into oblivion. A warm gust of wind blew in his face, and he realised it was not a typical London morning. It had not rained and humidity was not floating in the air. It was as if his own city wanted to look its best the day he was going away, surely never to return.

"I will always remember you, London, like this..." he whispered, softly smiling. "You have never been more beautiful than you are now."

Lowering his gaze, he focused his attention on the notebook he was holding on his knees. He got a firm grip

on the pen that had risen out of his fist like a sixth finger to his hand. Soon after, he was slowly writing. Slowly, as if he wanted his pen to linger on each word like a farewell kiss.

“October 18, 2016

Fortuna iuvat audacio... Fortune favours the bold; so at least the Latin saying goes. And I must muster up as much courage as I can find stored inside of me. I strongly believe in my origins. I am the last descendant of The Order of The Wooden Cross, and I am my father's son who unlike me, he has been aware of his duty as a Guardian of Knowledge until he drew his final breath. Now, I am determined not to let anything stand in my way. Possessing the courage of wanting to change life on earth as we have known so far, I am armed with everything I need in order to succeed. I am one inch away from freedom, as I am on the verge of coming across the extraordinary. And I will not be alone when I arrive to the end of my road. The reason why I haven't endeavoured to tackle my mission alone is because, just like Jesus Christ, I need a faithful companion to pass on my mission to you, my reader and the next Vessel.

What is a Vessel, maybe you are asking yourself? The Vessel, Carrier or the Container, is a sort of embryo where God has hidden a part of His soul in order to make the universe possible. Yes, without this fragment of divine essence, the world would perish and succumb to darkness. As you may already have figured it out, the Vessel is the most important thing in this world. Unfortunately, it doesn't last long. The Vessel may last centuries, if it's strong enough, but in the end it self-destructs. Have

you read Frazer's *The Golden Bough*? Frazer talks about the law of Rex Nemorensis, i.e. the Immortal King, only that it is not so immortal. His immortality consists in a succession of human vessels; that is why the successor kills the actual king and seizes the power only to lose the power to another successor who follows the same path of destruction. This is also what happens in our case. When the time comes, if I self-destruct in your time of existence, you are to take my place and become a Vessel. It is very possible I may not self-destruct in your time; then, you have the duty to pass on the knowledge to the following human Vessel. Remember, the Vessel must always be a Man, and not a woman. The tradition requires this legacy to be passed from father to son. If you are asking why a woman shouldn't be the Vessel, the explanation is quite simple. A woman is linked to her emotions, at least keener and more profound than a man is, and thus she can be easily influenced by evil, and you have seen it happened when the serpent first tempted Eve. A man will better know how to handle his emotions and never let them surface back. If there are other questions, my assistant or his descendant will provide the next Vessel with all the information required for his destiny. Now, let's return to the day it all started.

The beginning...what a promising word, and yet it hides so many illusions, so much mystery, and tremendous truth...This is the first day of our life journey, me and Gabriel's, and the day when everything began to unfold, like a mysterious thread, luring us towards our destiny. I am writing this for you, reader and carrier of secrets from a distant and unknown future. I have seen your face, and I have touched your frame. You are constantly in my mind and in my dreams. I know you as I

know myself, because all human vessels are mysteriously linked to each other.

I bow before you, reaching to greet you from the mist of time. Perhaps, I'll get to know you in person, if I self-destruct in your time. Who knows what lies ahead or what plans has divinity got in store for us? Who knows the secrets of this universe? Who knows?

I only know that one of the biggest secrets of the universe is the fascinating process of meeting someone for the first time. When the eyes meet and the hands shake, two souls align on the same plane of existence. Just like I am now beckoning you somewhere in time and space... How do you do? I wish to pay my respects to you, my immortal. I cherish and honour you as much as I love my books. Perhaps, better still, as you are a moving book with pictures in motion. Your heart is a constant reminder of the many lives you have experienced on this earth. I am positive that if I find the Garden of Eden then, I would solve the greatest riddle of our time, i.e. the meaning of life. Your consciousness, which acknowledges the destiny and story of a unique human being, will tell you that the logic of science is nothing but empirical evidence of organic metamorphosis. Nevertheless, science has failed to answer many questions.

Lend me your ear and journey with me through time and space. Before you were born, man had suffered from death. Now everything is about to change, and the beauty of all is that man knows it not. I can see how eager you are to be acquainted with your founding father. I also aspire to know God, to see His face or at least to understand Him. Perhaps, He cannot be seen. Perhaps He is like the air, never visible, but necessary. And I am a step away from Him. Still, I have to reach Him, to fight for

mankind's right to dwell on earth. Of course, there is also Gabriel Archer who will assist me on my journey. Regard it, reader, as an old uncle. Love him, cherish him, but never forget who gave birth to you. And that is I, Uriah Reed, son of James Reed. I alone have given birth to you, brought you into the existence of a human Vessel, God's holy vessel.

You must also remember this day. Never forget it! Never! This is the day when all began, when I and Gabriel have started our journey to Palestine. Why Palestine, you may be wondering? The manuscript of my father, James Reed, dead before he got the chance to see his son succeed where he had failed, led me there like the red skein of fate. It was I who was destined to hold the key to the secret of eternal life, and not my father. Like you too, my immortal, who will stride further than I have endeavored, because thus it has always been and thus it shall ever be.

Like all beginners and adventures, we have started our journey feeling very confident and proud to undergo such a noble task. We are travelling by car. You should see Queeny. Almost as shy and coy like a dairy maid, she is carrying us with pride, and I feel like riding a chariot of triumph. I know that Queeny shall have her share of fame and that no doubt she will become a very much appreciated artifact. And don't worry. I am not writing and driving at the same time. Gabriel is at the wheel, sailing across the sea of pavement and dust as conscientious as possible, like an experienced sailor. And I am writing to you, my loved one... to you and only to you...

I feel the power rising within me, subduing my fears, and bestowing upon me the gifts of a cunning narrator and historian. I do not want to deceive you. I want to present to you the bare truth of our journey. The

journal is undoubtedly the only reliable form of fiction as it only depicts the landscape of a man's existence. This is the first scenery of my landscape, of our landscape, mine and yours as well, my immortal. I see you pulling the curtain of time and watching straight into the arena of the 21st century, on the eighteenth day of the month of October when the leaves bleed under the cruel scarlet tint. I bow before you, my dear one. I have so long waited to meet you. You don't know how long is the waiting of one who loves alone with a heart of a giant. You don't know, but I do.

The road is long, almost as long as my waiting for you, but the secret of life lies ahead, in front of us, beckoning to our hungry minds for knowledge and to our souls driven by the noble feeling of desiring a better faith for mankind. Soon, very soon, my beloved child, there would be no more wars, no more famine, no more disease. All misfortunes shall perish, shall crumble into dust like a heathen temple pulled down by the wrath of the true gods. A long period of peace shall ensue, at least as long as my powers as a Vessel are intact. When I get weaker, mankind will look just as it looks now, but at least I'll keep the pairs of opposites balanced. Like the first children of this earth, we shall inhabit a paradise, and we shall remember how it feels to live in the presence of God and to be touched by His love. Soon, the history of mankind will be rewritten. We have enough atoned for our sins. It is time to recreate our home and to stop wandering from one cycle of existence to another. I am tired of wandering. But soon...soon everything will settle in one place and man's wanderings on earth will come to a halt.

I have also come to a halt. My feet have taken me straight to the ajar door of a new beginning, and I

am about to enter. At this very moment, London is left behind, disappearing like a speck of dust in the wind. New horizons overshadow the past sky lines, and I see you in the light of sunrise. My beloved child... My immortal... Oh, how much I love you....

Small drops of rain fall over the raw morning and beat against the car's bonnet. One moment ago it was sunny, and now after leaving London, nature becomes a step-mother. I have never liked rain. I hate to see the serenity of the sky disfigured by a gray grim of angry clouds.

Boom...I hear something. No, not a thunder... Out of the bloom, a raven pierces the silence with a long and hoary voice.

Nevermore...Nevermore...

Nevermore, bird of Poe, nevermore shall I return to a world where God is forgotten and mankind wanders alone in the dark of civilization.

The car is speeding. The raven is no longer heard. It seems like Queeny is a winged stallion, galloping madly across time and space. I didn't thought she could ride this way. Poor old Queeny...I can hear her hoofs of hot tire. She is crushing the gravel in her fury. Soon, she will find her rest. Unknown paths spread themselves into the distance, and the salty odour of the sea fills the air. The dock is nearby, and there our vessel awaits our arrival. We are going to travel by boat, as Queeny couldn't have undertaken the journey with us had we travelled by plane. And we need a vehicle to safely and quickly move on an unknown territory where dangers lurk in the shadows, since I am well aware that from the moment I embraced my destiny, darkness has been informed. Evil must have sensed that God's Vessel got weaker, and must have

already planned a counterattack. But I am not afraid. I am in the company of Gabriel Archer, just like two spiritual brothers bowing before the future generations of God's soul vessels.

SALVE FRATRE!

VI

The sun was bathing the room in the reddish faint colour of the evening. Pacing restlessly the floor, Andromeda's bare feet were gliding over the cold marble tiles, although the princess didn't feel anything. It wouldn't be the first time Andromeda affronted her father, but in the past their disputes had only been aroused by mere childish trifles. Nevertheless, the woman had woken up in Andromeda, and that new mysterious being kept whispering from within a truth as old as time, that what a father would forgive to a daughter was different from what a king would forgive to a princess.

Sighing, she took a seat on the windowsill. A flock of birds was now splitting the horizon, like feathery arrows brought to life by the breath of the evening wind. The eyes of the princess followed them longingly, until the birds disappeared from view, taking with them the sweet melody of freedom.

A tear dropped to the floor. She was not feeling okay. Her bones ached, as if her entire body had been broken limb by limb; and neither had she managed to sleep last night. Peculiar visions and nightmares had disturbed her rest. And now, the strong feeling that her entire happiness would collapse was towering above her, threatening to swallow her and bury her in the debris. She just knew the king wouldn't accept her decision. How many times she had pictured the scene in her mind...She

stood there, opening her heart to him, but her father's face expressed nothing but wrath. Neither had king Cepheus shown more anger and contempt at his daughter than the day their different desires clashed violently. The audacious girl had just announced her firm and resolute decision of not marrying Phineus. The king had never thought that his daughter might want something different than him, her own father, in what concerns marriage.

She shook her head, as if wanting badly to cleanse her mind of all those negative thoughts. There is still one last hope...There has to be. Yes, she was capricious and stubborn, but when it came to what was best for her kingdom, the princess obeyed the royal laws. But now everything had changed, she was looking upon the world from a different perspective. All her life she had run away from truth, but now she was tired. Andromeda needed to rest herself, to sit close to Perseus, not like a mistress, but like his friend and wife. She loved Perseus, she had always loved him. Her love for the slave boy was as strong and true as King Cepheus's love for Cassiopeia. Her father should understand that the Gods have planted inside her bosom the same flower that still grows even in her father's soul. Of course, Andromeda wasn't hoping all to go smoothly. The princess herself had suspected that she would arouse some sort of agitation but due to the charming naiveté of her youth, she really believed in a positive outcome. Therefore, weaving her hopes in a bright web, Andromeda had sent Lilytha to request in behalf of her mistress a meeting with both the king and the queen. The slave girl departed at once. And now, the princess was waiting for the doors to her room to open wide, revealing her parents stepping over the threshold.

Unaware of what was about to come, Cepheus was enjoying his evening stroll, pacing next to his queen.

Following the physician's advice, they always took a long walk before dinner, believing that the exercise would raise their appetites.

"Better than the walk, the scenery is great", the king smiled to his wife.

"Indeed, my king."

The king was right. The Royal Orchard had always been beautiful to contemplate, but particularly on that evening it offered a magnificent view. Trees were in bloom, and the fragrance delighted the soul and invited the mind to dwell on poetry. Cassiopeia looked radiantly beautiful, and the king felt his heart throbbing with pride. She was his queen and the mother of his daughter. And again he fell in love with her, despite the gray hair and fine wrinkles. In the light of the setting sun, the queen looked younger, resembling the girl she used to be, and the king only saw the woman he loved.

When Lilytha approached them unexpectedly, the king was pressing his lips on the white hand of his wife, and the queen had lowered her eyelashes, recalling before her the lost dream of youth. They were both startled by the unexpected intruder, and the queen flushed when the slave girl surprised their intimacy. Smiling surreptitiously, Lilytha took a humble pose, and after she delivered her mistress' message, she bowed till her locks touched the earth and retired quickly.

"I wonder what whimsical desire has urged our daughter to request our presence," said the king, smiling proudly.

"I am sure Andromeda will surprise us as she always does."

The queen was also proud of her daughter, maybe she was prouder than she should have been. And like any

mother she had often boasted about Andromeda's charms, even in front of the Nereids, the vestals of Poseidon. The vestals had warned the queen not to arouse the envy and fury of gods who never allow a mortal to claim his superiority on earth, but Cassiopeia did not listen.

"I am so glad your brother will honour us by marrying our daughter. When I think about it, my heart rejoices and ascends to the gods to give them praise for being so merciful. My daughter will shine like a jewel on Phineus' crown. She is such a match for Phineus...Have you noticed," she asked the king, "how beautiful our daughter is getting day by day?"

"That doesn't surprise me. She has you for a mother, hasn't she? By the will of gods, her beauty only matches yours, my queen."

"No, no. I may have been beautiful in my youth. I don't deny it, but no bud stays a bud forever, and till winter comes, the roses fade away, leaving behind the dry petals of their days of glory. My king, I am old now. Wrinkles have covered my face like blades of wrought iron and my movements have lost their agility. Nevertheless, even if I were young again, I would still have been overshadowed by my daughter. I believe that if all those legends that people tell about the sea nymphs were true, my Andromeda would be the fairest of them all. No daughter of the sea is worthy of one single comparison with the daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus. This is what my heart tells me, and a mother's heart is never wrong."

The king's hand encircled the queen's waist. She felt his caress, his deep love of a husband who embraced his wife, and when he whispered to her ear, a thousand butterflies rose in the air, filling the horizon of her soul's enchanting meadow.

"You will always be my idea of beauty. Andromeda may be the idea of perfection, but our daughter is just the spring which sprang from the mighty mountain whose loftiness and mesmerizing alluring can never be shattered by the wavering of a little spring."

Cassiopeia laughed enchanted by the witty speech of her husband. At that moment she looked younger and her beauty felt like a gust of fresh wind over the torrid desert of time.

The light of the evening sun fell upon them, as if the sky tried to hide them in a canopy of yellowish rays so that the gods above couldn't witness how the love at the old age was as powerful and fresh as love at the young age.

They entered the palace together, the queen holding her hand over the king's arm and the king pressing it gently with his caressing fingers. Passing the long corridors which had been illuminated by torches, Cassiopeia and Cepheus didn't stop until they reached the suit of the royal daughter. Nimby slaves, glowering in the light of the torches, opened the great oak doors, bowing before the king and the queen of Ethiopia. As they entered the chamber of their daughter's like two forerunners of love who didn't know what change lured in the shadows, another slave greeted them and called her mistress.

Meanwhile, Andromeda had left the quiet nook of the windowsill and resumed her strolling to and fro, nervously pacing on the floor. The princess was in a visible state of agitation and she kept rising her hawk-like eyebrows in a threatening frown.

"By the sun and the moon, and the heavens above, how long have I been waiting for you!" She shouted frantically when she saw her parents entering the room.

Forgetting all her manners and leaving behind the royal etiquette, Andromeda greeted the king and queen the manner a daughter greets her parents. She had ceased to be a royal subject and member of the royal family. She was just a girl who had discovered her womanhood and now wanted her parents to accept her independence, her love.

"What took you so long?" She scolded them. "Lilytha has long returned and I've assumed you would follow her immediately."

"Come here, my precious sapphire... my beloved bat³." The king opened his arms and embraced his daughter. Andromeda's fury was dissipating in the air like the whiff of the erupted lava. Her tone too changed, growing softer and tender.

"I really want to discuss with you something very important and it cannot wait."

"What is so important apart from the fact that you are now in the company of your parents?" the king jested.

"I am serious, A-ba⁴. It is a matter of life and death."

"Is it so? What do you know about life and death, bat?" The king looked at his wife with an amused smile upon his lips, and soon they both began to chuckle. "Look at our daughter how serious she is. One may think her life hangs by a thread."

Andromeda kept her pose and attacked the topic. It was no time for hesitations or drawbacks. She cleared her voice and proceeded.

"And it does, A-ba. My life does hang by a thread, and it's up to you to decide if I go on living or die. Let me finish, A-ba. Father, I know that you have already decided

3 Daughter (hebrew)

4 Dad (hebrew)

whom should I marry. I respect your decision, because I know that the High Priest asked the gods who should be my husband, and Phineus was chosen. But A-ba, I think the Gods are wrong, or at least the High Priest has misinterpreted their answer..."

The king beamed at her, and abruptly interrupted her confession.

"How dare you speak ill of the Gods or of the High Priest?"

"I am not speaking ill. I am just...Oh, father, don't you see? If I was indeed destined to Phineus, why would my heart not rejoice?"

Cassiopeia patted her daughter's shoulder. She looked as if she knew what was going on inside Andromeda's soul.

"Don't you worry, daughter of mine. I think I know what you are going through. Just like any normal girl, you are afraid of getting married. But you will grow to love Phineus in time, just like I did with your father."

"I am not you, mother. My heart tells me not to marry Phineus."

"Look, Andromeda. Sometimes, even the heart mistakes...Think with your head."

"I have thought, mother. The answer is still the same."

"Andromeda," the king intervened in the discussion. "Listen to your mother. Love will come in time. Just like wine matures with every passing year, so your heart will grow fonder of Phineus."

"A-ba, I am not a grape or a bottle of wine, waiting in the basement to be good enough to drink. I am a human being who can think for herself and choose for herself."

"You are not wise enough, Andromeda. You don't

know anything about this world, about the dangers that lie hidden in the dark."

"I am willing to learn, and I am not afraid to face the unknown."

"You don't know what you are saying."

"A-ba, it is you who doesn't know what you require of me when you try to force me into a marriage I do not wish for."

Both the queen's and the king's heart filled with sadness. They were hurt by their daughter's words. Still, the king kept trying to talk some sense into Andromeda.

"Bat, you are too young to understand the way things go in this world. I have fought battles that still haven't finished. I keep hearing inside my mind the cries of the men I killed or left behind. I have done things that I am ashamed of and for which the gods will one day punish me. Nevertheless, what kept me strong through all these trials was the love for Cassiopeia. I knew I had to return to her, and the thought that I was not being alone in this world nourished my mind and soul. No man should be alone, bat. I wish you to get married because I know that there will come a time when you need someone to protect you and look after you."

"My uncle will never be able to protect me, a-ba. He only looks after his petty desires. I have seen him loitering around with the slaves, and indulging himself in wine and spirits. He is not the husband I would look up to with pride. Being his wife will only make me lower my head in shame."

"Give him a chance, bat. He will change."

"Don't try to impose me your truth or assume that you know better. Father, I understand you, but that doesn't mean I have to agree with you. Like a loving

parent, you desire my happiness, and as a wise king you want the right successor to the throne of Ethiopia, a man fit to be my husband and future king. I respect your decision and I am glad to see how you strive to secure my future; but, my dear father, if I marry Phineus, neither will I be happy, nor shall Ethiopia thrive under his rule. I can't love Phineus because he is a feeble and ignoble man who knows nothing on love or on how to rule a kingdom. He may be your brother, but that doesn't make him the perfect husband for me. He has only the good fortune of having been born into a noble family, although he hasn't done any noble deed in all his life. You must acknowledge, a-ba, he is not the man for your Andromeda. I cannot love a man whom I despise, even if that man happens to be my uncle."

The queen grew pale and seemed almost on the verge of fainting, while the king scowled. Never had he imagined how unpleasant would some few words resound into the ear of a father when his only child uttered them. And for the first time, Cepheus felt the sadness of a father whose only daughter had proved a disappointment. The very thought that he had failed in his duty as a father filled his soul with unspeakable horror. Still, Andromeda didn't see the storm that ravaged her father's features. Blind to all but her love for Perseus, the princess continued her deposition.

"I know you mean well for me, but my heart belongs to someone else, a conqueror and a true man whom I respect and love deeply. This man is worth ten thousands Phineus-like men. Only with this man, I vowed before the gods to marry and obey, and only this man and no one else makes my soul sing and bestows upon my being a light that happiness has neither words nor sounds to recreate."

Cassiopeia looked horrified at the creature she had carried in her womb and struggled to give birth to. This was not her daughter, her beautiful one whose beauty was far above the daughters of the sea. The girl in front of her was a stranger, a representation of a ghoul who had been summoned by an evil wrong-doer in order to disturb the quietness of Ethiopia's rulers. It couldn't have been her daughter, her sweet Bat. And her horror was shared by the king who stared enraged at Andromeda as if only then he saw the true colours of a venomous serpent.

The king's chest was pierced by a savage cry and he sprang like a hungry beast, catching in his claws the arms of Andromeda. The girl's eyes grew bigger with surprise, but she didn't utter a word. She feared that she would be heard by Perseus. She had realized by then that if Perseus entered the room, the king would show no mercy.

I was behind the curtains ready to come out and, if necessary, kill the king and save her. But I knew she would never forgive me, so I resolved to stand still and wait to see the outcome. Moreover, I was convinced that the life of my beloved was not yet in danger. Although he was shaking her as if in his hands was no human being but a wax doll, I knew the doll wouldn't break. And he shook her violently till Andromeda shouted enraged: "Enough!", but he heard nothing. The girl then began to scratch and bite in her defense. Swearing violently, Cepheus let her go in disgust, but so unexpectedly did his firm grip released the princess that she lost her balance, and fell on the marble floor. Falling, she hurt her elbows and one knee, but she rose immediately from the ground, wildly gazing at her parents. Not a cry of pain came out of her throat. Proud and savage like a pagan deity she stood among her mortal parents and persecutors of her love.

"Look at her, Cassiopeia! Look at your beauty!"

The king's mocking tone cut through the heart of the queen. Cepheus couldn't care less. He continued to shout, maddened and afflicted by sorrow and grief.

"Tell me his name, adder! I want to know the name of the rascal you shared your bed with. You behaved the way a slave does. You've lain with him under my own roof. Cetus had been telling the truth when he told me he had seen you with a slave, in the forest. And I was blind. I refused to believe him."

"Cetus is not telling the truth", yelled Andromeda frightened by what might happen.

"Silence", thundered the king. "You are not worthy to address me the word. You acted like a slave, and like slaves you and your lover shall both perish."

"A-ba, please be reasonable. I haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

The king analysed her attentively. He seemed to weight her words in the scales of his reason.

"Yes, you might be telling the truth." He started pacing the room up and down, talking aloud to himself. "Yes, it might not be all lost. The gods have mercy on me. I just wanted what's best for her, and how cruel is she repaying my love. How cruel to dishonour my name and my house..."

He came to a halt and closed his eyes. Andromeda's heart shrank to see him so battered by the rough winds of fate. Suddenly, he looked older and cowered by an invisible burden. And indeed, he felt older. The king kept his eyes closed, looking within the fountain of old memories when Andromeda was a little girl whom he held on his knees or rocked her in his arms. Then, she had

not broken his heart.

When he opened his eyes again, he first looked at Cassiopeia, trying to recognize her features. It seemed as if a century had gone by since he last saw her. But there she was - his queen and love of his life. He smiled faintly but she didn't smile back. She gazed gravely at him, not daring to talk or move. For a moment, Cepheus wanted to ask her what was wrong, but then he remembered, and the awful truth return to haunt his present reality. Andromeda was no longer a little girl. She had grown up, and now she was poisoning his old age.

"Tell me the name of the rascal", he said, trying to control his anger.

"He is no rascal. He is as noble as you, dear father. I venture to add that he is even nobler than you, as he wouldn't have caused so much suffering, hurting so cruelly the heart of a woman, of a daughter."

"Do you dare to compare me with him?" The king's face was contorted with rage. "Look, Cassiopeia! Where is now the beauty against whom not even the sea nymphs are able to stand? Where is the beauty with whom all the beauties fail to match? Look at her....She is a monster, a whore."

"Yes," cried Cassiopeia in despair. "I have been deceived. I have nursed a serpent. Kill her, my king. Crush the serpent."

The words struck Andromeda heavily in the heart. Never had she imagined her own mother whose tongue had only spilt honey and appraisal, could now utter such things. The princess raised her head with dignity, restraining the tears from betraying her suffering.

"You've been deceived, haven't you?" she retorted. "So have I. But life always deceives those who

expect too much from it. Am I a serpent? Be it. I am a serpent. Therefore, I do not belong here. Your palace is all too mighty for an adder to nest in. Release me into the wilderness and erase the memory of Andromeda from your hearts. And Andromeda, too, shall forget about you. I will go among the heathen and dwell with the beasts, and I shall be happy and free."

"How dare you speak like that?"

The voice of Cepheus blew the entire room up, like a ravaging hurricane pulling trees from their roots and thrusting its wrath against the jagged walls of the mountains.

"How dare you? Are you still not repenting? Why don't you kneel and ask for mercy?"

"What harm have I caused to repent for? I haven't done anything I should regret, and no need have I for mercy since I've only cherished your love. Your mercy is not coveted by me."

Her reckless words increased the wrath of Cepheus, while Cassiopeia tried to steady her muffled sobs. But the princess remained up on her pedestal of majestic righteousness. There was in Andromeda something that reminded of a seagull whose wail and outspread wings hover over the clamor of the turbulent sea. Watching her, I knew. My sandpiper had for the first time found his wings...

The voice of Cepheus thundered through the room.

"You shall marry Phineus or else you are no longer our daughter."

"And you are no longer my parents..." she bitterly cried back, but her words faded away unheard.

"Tell me the name of the accursed. Tell me or I'll slit

your neck as if it were the bloody gorge of a wild beast. Or better, I'll throw my spear into your chest so that it may pierce that evil heart of yours."

The cries and curses were falling upon her like a shower of cold rain. She felt nothing. She heard nothing. The dying sun was rolling like a ball of fire over the earth, and his last embers slid along the marble floor, enfolding the veil of light to Andromeda's feet. And she remained silent.

And I was silent too. I could see his name written so deep on her lips, but not a syllable was uttered. He was still there, hiding behind a colonnade of stone. Poor mortal, fearing to show up when the one he claimed to love was being tortured. But that is the way human beings understand love. Sometimes, I believe I am lucky not to feel, not to be taunted by this accursed fate of mankind who give over so easily to temptation and emotions.

The silk canopy trembled in Cepheus' fists, and a vase scattered to pieces on the floor. But she who loved Perseus did not betray her heart. Outside, the wind had violently begun to blow, sweeping the dust in its way, making the orange branches shake like reeds; and from the bogs a sickening odour had risen up to the sky's black canopy of freshly lit stars. And down on earth, the mortals fought their bloody and irresolute wars.

I fail to understand the meaning of the human love. People...ghostly companions of evil and good, skeletons covered in flesh and blood, and sometimes they have a brain, while others have more heart. They struggle in vain, for nothing, for just a moment of fleeting happiness. And look at him, the pitiful human slave, hiding in the shadows while his love is being offended. I may not have loved, but this I do know; if I were him,

I would have gathered the world's armies, dead or alive, and commanded them to battle. Yes, for the mortal with dark eyes like the darkness from where I have come, for the mortal with twilight hair.

Oh, it's so sickening...I can hear his thoughts, I can hear her heartbeats. I feel her parents' anger. I am glad everything will come to an end. The Vessel will soon be destroyed...and I'll be here to see it happen...to make sure it will happen.

Lilytha rushed in to help her mistress, but the other slaves dared not to interfere. From my hiding place, I could see Lilytha was very much agitated and flustered, and I did not like the shrewd glance she threw to Andromeda. The king turned towards the slave who by the time he realised what was happening, had knelt before him, imploring forgiveness. Enraged by such an audacity, the king called for one of his guards and grabbing a knot he raised it in the air. Andromeda cried and ran to stop Cepheus, but the pitiless blow hit both the princess and the slave. A wild cry split my silent throat as I couldn't contain myself anymore. Rushing from behind the curtain, I ran towards Andromeda trying to cover her with my body.

The horror that had spread over the king's face was only matched by Andromeda's surprised gaze. Her eyes did not reflect pain. She looked into my eyes, and for the first time I read in those black pupils the warm words she had never uttered in my presence. She was not startled to see me there. Perhaps she had grown accustomed with my following her everywhere. I had been her shadow ever since we were kids.

Many years ago, I was bought by her father from the bazaar one day when the royal family was passing

through the market in a luxurious chariot. Andromeda had seen me and made king Cepheus to stop the chariot. She ran towards me. I can still recall her in my mind, a tiny speck of curly black hair, running to me in a white long dress.

"What is your name?" she asked me when we stood face to face.

At first, I did not want to talk, but she smiled and her smile reminded me of my mother who was the only person that had ever treated me with kindness.

"I am Perseus."

"I have never heard of anyone called Perseus before." She whispered.

"My mother Danae named me like this."

"I like your name", the little girl replied to the boy slave who stood before her in chains, famished and dirty.
"Where is your mother now?"

"I don't know. We were separated when she was bought by another slave master who did not want me."

"I am very sorry", she said saddened by my story.

"It's ok", I tried to comfort her. "When I miss my mother I sing, and thus pain slowly fades away."

"Do you know how to sing?"

"Yes."

"Who has taught you?"

"No one. I guess I was born like this."

She looked at me with envy, and it was strange to see a princess who had everything looking longingly at a slave who had something she had never possessed.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked her.

"It's just that I have always wanted to sing. But I cannot. I've been keeping all these songs bottled up in me, and I am not able to bring them to life."

I laughed and she looked at me, waiting as if to witness the wander of me passing my musical gift to her.

"Don't you worry", I tried to comfort her. "One day, you will find your song."

She looked at me in disbelief, and after taking time to reflect, she came with the proposal that would change my life forever.

"Would you like to come to the palace and sing to me? I would love to hear you sing."

I looked at the little princess and for the first time I felt I was no longer alone. There was someone in the world who needed me, and who wanted my company and my music.

Now she is again looking into my eyes.

"Sing to me, harpist", her eyes whisper, "sing to me of the places where people are free."

And I sing to her with my soul as my hands are reaching for hers, taking them from the floor. They are covered in dust but how beautiful they seem to me. And she looks at me, penetrating with her gaze the hollows of my soul. I also look at her, and our souls mingle, meeting halfway. Her eyes speak of distant memories when I played my harp and she danced and danced. She would whirl and spin, fluttering like a huge butterfly. And I watched her mesmerized, as she changed the rhythm, flying passionately on the wings of music. That was long time ago, and now her flight had ceased and she lay broken on the floor. Surprise and disillusionment sprang from the dark pupils, but there was also sadness in her eyes; the astonishment spread wide like a bottomless abyss. And the king shuddered, for the first time frightened. But like a criminal who is only tormented by the first crime and grows accustomed with mischief, so

did the king's horror receded and turned again into fury. Cepheus pulled his sword out and threatened both girls and me. The slave known as Lilytha trembled and begged for mercy. Andromeda said nothing but her sadness was speaking for her.

"I will spear you, unworthy beasts. And you, harpist, how dare you interfere where there's not your business? You shall perish as well," shouted the king, and then again channeled his rage against Andromeda. "Tell me the name of the accursed one, you who were once my daughter."

"The only accursed one is the man who spills the blood of his kin." Andromeda replied calmly, although her face had a deadly paleness.

"You are not my kin, you serpent."

"Then I owe you nothing. Not even the sacred bliss of truth."

"Speak. I command you as a king."

"I am no longer your daughter. Neither is a serpent faithful to the kings of this earth. I belong only to myself."

Cepheus roared and cursed his daughter. The sword was about to fall and accomplish the abominable deed when Lilytha who didn't want to die, cried sobbing:

"It's Cetus. It's Cetus...Cetus."

The name seemed to have caught life and like a mysterious bird of prey it pecked with its beak the heart of all those gathered in madness and hate. Andromeda grew paler and blinked in astonishment.

"What?"

"Cetus?" the king kept repeating. "I can't believe it...My own general..."

Andromeda rose from the floor, not looking towards Lilytha.

"The slave woman is mistaken. I was also

mistaken. I thought I loved Cetus, but I didn't. Believe me", she said, clenching her fists, "The man I love lives in the Valley of the Kings, far away from here, closer to the Nile's enchanting waves. He knows nothing of sorrow or pain, and like a sandpiper he flies with the storks and with the colourful birds of distant Africa."

Both the king and the queen looked at her as if she had gone mad. The silence that ensued didn't last long. A joyful roar of laughter seized the slave girl who had risen from the floor.

"It means the stranger was right."

"What stranger?" asked the King.

"He didn't tell me his name. I met him at the fountain when I was filling the barrels with fresh water. Out of nowhere he appeared and asked me to give him water. He had addressed me as a royalty, and his handsome features and his attire that showed he was not of a humble condition, made me obey his command. I gave him water to drink. He just took one sip, and without thanking me for it, he urged me to fill the barrels and hurry home because my mistress was waiting for me. And then he sighed, pitying me for the bad mistress I had who wouldn't even tell me the truth. When I asked him what truth he was referring to, he laughed. When he ceased laughing, his raspy voice spoke again: 'The truth of the heart. What your mistress conceals from you is her love for the slave known as Perseus.'"

Andromeda cried enraged, losing all her control. If she had had a dagger, she would have pierced Lilytha's breast before she could utter the name of her beloved and thus sentence him to death. She rose from the floor, pulling her hands from mine.

"What have you done, you fool?" she cried to

Lilytha. Do not believe her, father. She is mumbling nonsense as slaves do when cowardly they seek to evade a punishment. I do not love Cetus, and surely I do not love a slave. The former is merely a general, while the latter is not even worth taking him into consideration. My heart yearns for more."

Although, I knew she wasn't telling the truth, her words saddened me. Unfortunately, neither did the king seem to believe. Cepheus grinned menacingly.

"Do not try, serpent, to protect your lover. By night fall, he shall die."

Andromeda's majestic calmness disappeared in a jiffy and in its place, a beast appeared. Shouting a wild cry, Andromeda attacked Lilytha.

"You've betrayed me."

Her fingers coiled the helpless neck. Lilytha fought for air, beseeching mercy. But what mercy could a tigress show for the hunter who killed her tiger cub. Hot tears burnt the hands who were struggling, but the princess didn't feel their fire. Lilytha panted and wept, tearing with her hands the attire of the princess. She couldn't release herself, and Andromeda didn't want to release her either. I got up and tried to stop her, but her fingers had clenched like iron, refusing to release the helpless prey.

"Please, my princess. She is worthless. Let her be."

Andromeda refused to listen, and vainly did I attempt to remove her hands from the slave's neck. Her grip was so firm and soon her attack proved to be deathly. When the final breath of life left Lilytha's chest, Andromeda bent over the dead body and kissed the cheek imbued with tears.

"I have loved you, Lilytha. But never have I hated you more than in these last moments. Be cursed, Lilytha,

for in betraying me, you've betrayed yourself. Gods show no mercy to traitors. Remember my words, Lilytha when you cross the roads of shadow."

King Cepheus had watched the murder without any interference. He was fascinated to discover in his daughter a ferocious predator. The cruel scene had given him an idea. By this time, Cassiopeia, who had suddenly had a change of heart, reached her husband and implored him to spare Andromeda.

The king smiled cunningly to his wife. Andromeda didn't see the smile as she was contemplating the lifeless body of Lilytha. She heard as in a dream the king's stammering.

"My general involved in this...and my own slave has brought shame upon my house. All because of a whore...You...you serpent..."

His strong fist pulled Andromeda's hair, and closed in a firm grip. Maddened, she scratched with her nails and tried to bite, but a heavy palm smartened her face, leaving red trails of fingers all across the cheeks.

"Be still, you harlot," he spat out. "I notice you treasure the life of the rascal you pretend to love. I shall see you witness the show of his death."

"Stop, king Cepheus", I desperately shouted, and I knew what I had to say. "The slave lied. It is not me whom she loves."

Andromeda stared at me in awe and the king froze, listening to my words with impatience.

"It is I who have threatened her and compelled the princess to say she loves me. The truth is she has always despised me."

"And what power could a worm like yourself have had over my daughter, forcing her to lie to her own

father?"

I stammered, but I knew there was no way out.

"I dishonoured her one night, and out of shame, fearing the results of my crime, she agreed to say she loved me. She couldn't marry Phineus anymore, and I forced her to agree that marrying me was the best solution. But still, she had to convince you..."

"Stop lying, Perseus!" Andromeda shouted, trying to release herself from her father's grip.

The claw-like fist finally let go of Andromeda's hair. Pale as death, the princess leaned against a marble pillar. She was drawing her breath, trying to still her heartbeats. I did not know if I could make her father forgive her, but at least I could try to save her life, even if that would have meant my own death. Nevertheless, I was already sentenced to death.

"Why are you lying, Perseus? There is no need. Father, the slave is just trying to save my life."

The king approached me, and when he spoke his tone was calm and a little bit ironic.

"And I believe that. He couldn't have forced you. He doesn't have the guts. Look at him, Andromeda, a pitiful creature. Is this truly the man worth ten thousand Phineus-like men?"

"Stop it, father."

"If it is you she loves," the king had now turned to me, "why has she stained her hands with blood? I have never seen her in such a fury. Are you so precious to protect?"

"She was afraid, sir", I cunningly replied or better said fervently wanted to sound as convincing as never, "that Lilytha might change her mind and reveal the awful truth about the night the princess was dishonoured."

King Cepheus looked at me incredulously, and then at Andromeda whose face had lost its colour.

"Why does this gnat keep parroting the same nonsense?" he asked of her.

Andromeda fell to her knees bowing her head before the king. She hadn't implored for her life, but now she was praying for the one she loved.

"Perseus is not guilty of any crime. Spare his life. Not because I ask you, but think of all the times this pure soul has delighted our nights with the sound of his music. Father, you have known him since he was a child. He was raised here in this palace, and his only guilt lies in the friendship he has for me. And yes, I love him, king Cepheus. I have loved him ever since I saw him in the slave bazaar when I was a little girl. But my love for him is different from the love I have for my prince from the Valley of the Kings. I accept anything you consider fit to serve me as punishment. Even death... Still, I beg of you, grant me one single wish. Spare both the life of Perseus, and of Cetus. Cetus is guilty of no crime and his only misfortune has been the loyalty he has shown me. But he is not to be blamed. In being loyal, he has only done his duty. Please, my king, do not lose a good general. It is better to lose a bad and useless daughter. I accept anything you have in store for me."

VII

Blue Bandit was sailing across the ocean as swiftly as a gull, swerving in the furious billows and soaring to the cloudless sky. It was a commercial vessel, but it had also plenty of room for two passengers. Our librarians knew very well Captain Ralph O'Hara, a nice Irish who was also a distant cousin of Mr. Gabriel Archer. O'Hara allowed his two acquaintances to get on board, although he was amazed of their crazy idea of travelling so far. But he didn't ask too many questions, and for Uriah Reed that was a relief since he didn't want to further develop the theme in front of strangers, moreover when he wasn't even sure of ever achieving his goal. The Captain offered them two cabins situated on the lower deck, and he also took care that Queeny should be nicely placed alongside his cars. He had three other cars on which he used to transport the goods to the central store in each location he had a contract with. Uriah and Gabriel thanked him heartily and they passed the first days of journey in the joyous company of the Captain himself.

Captain Ralph O'Hara was a jolly fellow and always laughed and smiled. He seldom got angry, and then his smile would turn into a menacing grin. Then his hoarse voice would angrily shout to the other mates, while his stout body jumped energetically from one place of the deck to another. Luckily, his nervous fits were so rare and even if they did occur, they didn't last for long.

Only once in his life had he been sad, and that story he often told to whoever lent him his ear. The same story he shared with Uriah and Gabriel on the first night on board of the Blue Bandit.

"I still remember that night", he recalled and at the same time took a hearty bite from a mutton chop. After he swallowed the edible cargo, he resumed his story. "It was a cold December day. Blue Bandit had docked in the central harbor of the Netherlands, and I was out there among the Dutch. Funny, I felt strange. I guess I have never felt more alone. There were thousands of people there, some were chanting old tunes and others were gaily talking to each other as they headed for a local pub; while I was looking for her... My Katarina Radumerian, a beautiful Armenian with eyes like coal and lips like fire. Oh, my fellows, when she looked at me I always lost my senses. Shackled by her poignant gaze, I remained by her side. I was young then, and when she kissed me, it was as if someone had spilt fire whisky down my throat. And there was I, my fellows, back to her, hungrily searching for her, for the woman I had sworn never to return to.

Lost in the crowd, I knew she must be there, although I could not see her. She lived in Netherlands and we met in the same harbor twenty years ago. On that December night, I had returned after eight years of absence, during which we didn't see each other. We madly loved one another, but she betrayed me and I left her. Well, to be honest, it was I who first left her and then came back to her as soon as Blue Bandit reached the shores of Netherland, only to find her in the arms of another man. And I left again, and never looked for her. But friends, I know that I have only deceived myself. I have never parted with Katarina, because she is always

in my mind and in my soul. My Katarina Radumerian... How beautiful she was, my fellows. You should have seen her. My Katarina was just like a gipsy princess. But let's come back to that December night. I was freezing to death, and still no trace of her. I was just getting ready to return on deck when a stray child pulled my sleeve, and startled I looked at him.

'Sir', he said, 'I am so hungry. I haven't eaten anything for days. I am starving, sir. Would you buy me a loaf?'

The boy had hollowed cheeks and his poor clothes barely covered the lanky frame of a tiny human body. I nodded and beckoned him to follow me. When we got to a bakery outside the dock, I bought him a warm loaf of bread. He was greedily following my every movement; like he was afraid I could have changed my mind and decided to keep the loaf for myself. When I finally placed the loaf in his tiny hands, his fingers closed tightly over the precious treasure.

'Thank you, sir', he said with tears in his eyes.

But he didn't begin to eat it as I had expected. Instead, he pressed it protectively at his bosom, and he was just about to depart, when I asked him where he was going. He told me he had to arrive to his little cottage to share the loaf with his dying mother, and that he had to hurry lest he met other child beggars who might attempt to snatch the loaf away from him.

I bought him another loaf and accompanied him to his cottage. Snow was heavily falling, and the cold air cut one to the bone, and yet he was so poorly dressed, so helpless. I pitied him heartily and wanted to see him safely returning to his sick mother. But imagine my surprise when on arriving to his cottage, I found his dying mother

freezing near the hearth where no fire was burning, and when she turned around to see who was coming, my eyes rested on the familiar face of my Katarina. She had changed, and only the marks of sorrow and near death could be seen in the place of her faded beauty. Recognizing me, she coughed embarrassed and lowered her head. I knew she hated me for seeing her like this, faded and defeated. I was too at a loss of words, but then I knelt beside her and placed the loaf into her hand. Her fingers were so cold and they trembled as they touched mine. I wrapped an old shawl around her shoulders, and asked if she was ok. She nodded, but did not look at me.

It was a strange surreal scene. Feeling tears coming into my eyes, I stood up and bade goodbye. She didn't answer. However, I didn't leave until I paid a local innkeeper to fetch her some wood for making fire in the hearth. The man took the money and went on his errand. Nevertheless, when I returned to the harbor a month later, I found the cottage empty. Katarina had died and the boy was staying at the inn where he would start working as soon as he grew older enough. The same night I left Netherlands, and I didn't come back ever since."

"Was the child yours?" Uriah asked the captain.

"I don't know", the answer came. "I never got to ask her."

"But he could have been..."

The captain looked embarrassed.

"I guess..."

"You have never seen the boy ever since. Are you not curious what it has become of him?"

"I know he owns the inn now, after Peter, the late innkeeper that took him in, died and left him the business. I know it because I have been asking around

other sailors. My Raphael, that's his name, is doing fine. He's a prosperous merchant, married to a wonderful woman, and a father of two healthy boys."

"Why don't you visit him?"

"What's the point?" There was sadness now in his voice. "He wouldn't want me. He still blames me for having left his mother and him...And damn, he's right. I haven't been the perfect dad, have I?"

"There is never too late to atone for one's sins."

The captain blushed embarrassed. Realizing the awkward situation, Gabriel coughed and tried to change the subject.

"Talking of sins", he tried to sound merry. "Please, my dear cousin, why don't you tell us some funny stories about that Romanian priest who liked to indulge himself with wine?"

"That's right, Gabriel. I used to know a priest. What a fine fellow...His name was Popa Rădulescu. Oh, I still remember the merry night we had together, drinking wine and eating roast chicken. "

The captain wiped the tears from his eyes.

"He was very famous in his village where he had his parish. Even now if you go to Cepari, and ask about Popa Rădulescu, people will remember a funeral and a headache". Captain Ralph O'Hara burst into laughter. "First, let's begin with the funeral. Our Popa Rădulescu was once attending a funeral. After the ceremony, he took a seat by the table and started to eat together with other people who had come to pay their respects to the deceased. Now, everybody knew the priest liked to drink, and to avoid seeing him drunk, they served him milk with bread for the final course. After drinking the milk, he asked for his wine.

'Where is the wine, my good people?'

All the men looked sheepishly at him, and the widow replied.

'But father, you've just had milk...'

'So? My daughter, wine is good with all types of dishes.'"

Ralph O'Hara laughed heartily.

"And there's more. One day, the priest had a migraine. As he had no pill in his house, he asked one from his neighbours. When the woman brought him the pill, she was shocked to see that the priest had filled his glass with wine.

'Father, aren't you going to take the pill with water?'

'Why should I do that, my daughter? Isn't wine a liquid, too?'"

The captain wiped a tear, took a sip from the flask he was carrying on his hip, and toasting for Popa Rădulescu, as that was the priest's name, blinked at the two friends who had politely kept silence and listened to the story although they skipped large portions of events as they were tired and wanted to retire in their berths. Unfortunately, every night, with the persistence of a dead clock, the captain would again recount his sad love story to his two dinner guests. And soon, Uriah and Gabriel had learnt it by heart.

Almost a week had passed, when one night Uriah Reed woke up in a state of utter desolation. Another strange dream had haunted his sleep and left its deep mark impressed on his mind. Why did he keep dreaming about the Ethiopian princess whom he only thought to be a myth? And now she was real, she had a face, she had a voice, and she had that strange familiarity that he had

briefly spotted on the unknown woman who passed by his window. Could that dream mean something? Perhaps the journey to Palestine had triggered some reminiscence of the unconscious, and the city of Jaffa, where Andromeda lived according to the myth, had woken in him the echoes of a distant past. Uriah got up from his bed and went to the table. His night shirt was completely drenched in sweat. He pulled it off his head, and put on a clean one. Feeling thirsty, he filled a glass with water and emptied it down his throat. He was still agitated. Uriah Reed felt like he was being watched, although there was no one with him. He looked around. Loneliness and the wavering jingle of the waves filled the interior of Uriah's cabin. It was a tiny cabin, but Uriah liked it. He felt as if he was again in his office from the library, writing and studying while time passed by like a cruising ship over the foam of the sea.

October 24, 2016

We are getting closer and closer to our destination. It has been six days since I and Gabriel set our foot on the deck of the ship "Blue Bandit". The Captain is a nice old fellow, except for the torture he makes us undergo every time we have dinner, but besides his Katarina obsession we have nothing else to complain. Also, the other sailors don't bother a soul. I and Gabriel enjoy total discretion, since we are the only passengers on board. Moreover, I haven't suffered from sea-sickness yet, but there is something else that keeps bothering me. I have been having strange dreams, that kind of dreams that fills one soul with awe and wonder. They seem so real, and every time I wake up, I keep asking myself whether I have really woken up or maybe this life that I believe it

to be real is in fact the genuine dream. When I close my eyes at night, I become Perseus, a slave in love with the princess of Ethiopia. I know the myth of Andromeda, and although it differs from my dream, somehow it all seems real. And somehow, it kind of makes sense. Palestine, the country I am travelling to, was once called Ethiopia, and even if I have never been there, I know it by heart. I can tell each stone and rock, the contour of a valley or the murmur of each water stream. Is it possible? I thought the goal of this expedition was to unravel the mysteries of Creation and to discover eternity, to become God's vessel in order to save mankind; but now it feels like I am in fact unraveling the mysteries of my dreams and in doing so, I discover the mythical past of an existence I was not even aware of. Perhaps, like the pair in the drawing I am not supposed to descend alone in the Valley of the Kings where the Garden is located. Who knows?

I feel my head throbbing with pressure. Who am I? Who is really Uriah Reed? And her...her eyes are a hidden book where I read words I cannot fully comprehend, but which I wish to decipher. Dark like the darkest night are those eyes of hers, and still when I hold her hands in my dream and our faces are so close to each other, I can see the faint green light of her soul. Yes. Her soul is like a forest filled with singing birds and lofty trees.

Cepheus was threatening us with his sword, but I only feared that if I had let go of her hand, she might have vanished and I would have awoken. But I always awake; and her face hides behind the shadows of this present where I am Uriah Reed and Perseus is only the representation of a dream. And I cannot protect her, especially from that unknown shadow that has crept into my dreams...Perhaps the shadow is only the anticipation of the evils with whom I'll have to fight very soon.

**

The land of Palestine was somewhere in the distance, hidden from sight but nevertheless present in the mind of all the sailors who had grown tired during the journey, but especially in the mind of Messrs. Gabriel Archer and Uriah Reed. The two comrades really enjoyed their voyage. All day long they kept walking down the deck, talking and planning the future of mankind. The most excited was Uriah, of course, although Gabriel had also begun to daydream about the colossal things his companion kept describing to him. And time flew gently by, and moment by moment they were getting nearer and nearer to their destination. According to Captain O'Hara they were due to arrive by the end of November. Meanwhile, journeying on the salty ocean proved to be a real adventure. Even for Queeny which was safely harnessed under the deck, in the select company of the captain's merchant cars.

"We've done it, my friend. We've actually done it!" Uriah said to Gabriel on one of their usual evening strolls.

Uriah's chest filled with a sensation of pride and satisfaction as he looked to his friend, expecting to see on the latter's face the same feeling. But Gabriel didn't pay attention to Uriah. His anxious gaze was carefully examining the waves. That evening, they didn't look too friendly. The nasty blue serpents were coiling and jumping, trying to bite the colossal iron walls. Despite the perilous sight, the vessel kept its route straight. The Captain himself laughed heartily and did not even bother to look twice at the stormy sky.

"By the look on your faces, I suspect you are getting worried. I have seen worse, lads! Trust me; this is

a piece of cake."

The wind grew colder, and Gabriel slightly began to resent the chillness. A shiver, creeping coldly across his backbone, brought to him all his childish fears of a storm at sea. And the shiver crept and crept, reaching finally to his heart.

"What is bothering you, Gabriel?" Uriah asked when he saw his friend's miserable look.

"Nothing," he stammered trying to look brave, "absolutely nothing."

"It doesn't seem like nothing to me."

"Seriously, Uriah, you don't need to worry over me. A little bit of seasickness, that is all. I have never been a traveller before, and this is a huge change for me."

The Captain laughed again and patted Gabriel's shoulder, trying to reassure him he had nothing to worry about. Despite his attempts, Gabriel's spirits were low. He regretted ever going out on sea and quitting his job. However, they had gone too far to go back. Uriah understood Gabriel's feelings. He had also been a thought traveller, and for the first time he had plunged into the perils and charms of the unknown. But Uriah didn't believe that his friend was only bothered by seasickness. He carefully examined Gabriel whose gaze had now turned to the sky. There was silence for some moments. Neither of them spoke and Uriah didn't cease to look at Gabriel. The latter had his eyes fixed on the canopy above, carefully examining the movement of the clouds and the direction of the air draught. A few moments later, the verdict came.

"I think a storm is approaching", Gabriel announced ominously. "And it isn't going to be a mild one."

"My lad", the Captain addressed him joyfully. "This is no storm that is coming; it's merely bad weather scenery. How many times do I have to tell you not to worry? You remind me of my poor Katarina Radumerian. Like you, she would worry and feared I one day leave her, and then she made me promise not to abandon her. Oh, youth, youth, how quickly do you pass...Have I told you about the night spent in Netherlands? It was a December night and the Blue Bandit had docked in the harbor. There were so many people on land, going about their own business, and I had only eyes for my Katarina. I was searching for her...."

Uriah frowned and didn't listen anymore. It was the same old story he had been listening to ever since he got on board. Instead, he too examined the black sky. No star was visible, but once in a while wavering lines of electricity crept like yellow snakes on the dark canopy above. He wasn't afraid of thunders, but the idea of being trapped in a storm at sea disturbed him a little. His rough British features got rougher as he tried to pierce the thick wall of mist that had formed around the ship.

How could I not have observed this mist? He thought.

He had been so fully absorbed by his ideas and plans, and the strange dreams that kept haunting his nights; that he hadn't mentioned to Gabriel the fact he indeed had missed what was going on around him.

When the first raindrop fell from the sky, Uriah took Gabriel by the arm, leading him to the cabin that was next to Gabriel's own berth.

"Where are you going, lads?", O'Hara cried behind them, slightly giggling.

"To rest for a while", Uriah answered.

"When I was your age, I didn't need to rest at all."

But go, go. I won't stop you."

And they headed towards the lower deck. They didn't stop until they were inside the cozy cabin and far away from Captain O'Hara's stories. It was a small room, with only one bed, a closet, and a table with a single chair. The same items of furniture which could also be found in Gabriel's room...But Uriah's cabin had a round window facing the ocean. When they entered in, the waves were beating against the thick glass, causing an infernal racket. It was behind that window that Uriah Reed placed himself like a sentinel on guard.

"My friend," he began addressing to Gabriel, "I wonder if the storm will delay us from reaching the shores of Palestine in due time."

Gabriel's eyes popped out. He was vexed and exasperated.

"Don't you ever stop thinking about anything else?"

"There isn't anything else worth thinking about at this very moment."

He lied, but Gabriel did not know.

"You sound just like my cousin, the captain. I am sick and tired to hear his love story, as I am sick and tired to follow you around like a puppy God knows where."

"Is that what you truly feel?"

"Of course."

"Why did you come then? You could have stayed in London."

"I didn't have much of a choice. You said you were going to leave and intended to take me along. How could I have left you alone? I wouldn't have had a peaceful day until your return home."

"I will never return home."

"Yes, I have heard that too. But have you thought, that if the Bible is right, after the great deluge, the surface of the earth changed and the Garden of Eden had submerged God knows where? We may be after a wild goose chase, Uriah."

"We are not. I know that."

Gabriel scowled.

"Because you've read it in a manuscript and in an old book?!"

The features of Uriah's face grew rougher.

"Because I believe in my father."

"Well, I don't." Gabriel roared with fury.

There was a chilling moment of silence, and when Uriah spoke he sounded exhausted.

"Why are you now telling me this?"

"Because we are caught on board and a storm has begun, and you only think about the manuscript and your garden and you seem to forget that we are not in the vicinity of Eden but in the middle of a storm," retorted Gabriel.

"No. It is the storm that stays in the middle of our way."

Taken aback, Gabriel was silent. He was strongly inclined to consider the highly respectable librarian Uriah Reed a little bit gone of the whack.

"Nonsense", exploded Uriah. "We are living in the 21st century. What can a storm do against technology, against the power of man who has so divinely invented gadgets and other apparatus?"

"Nature is always stronger than man", whispered Gabriel.

"Nonsense", spattered Uriah. "Besides, if you are so afraid of a little storm at sea why have you set your foot on deck? Why have you insisted on taking a boat

when we could have travelled by plane? Had we flown by plane, we would have arrived there by now."

"Oh, is it so Uriah Reed?! Just take a plane, no, this is what you have suggested, haven't you? And forget about Queeny? Of course, we needed a means of transport but a plane would not have made possible for my car to continue the journey. Besides, a car is very useful on land. It will turn to be very useful as soon as we get to Palestine."

Uriah sighed. There were no more winds in his sails.

"Well, you are right, my friend. You are positively right. It seems this was meant to be. And it's no use complaining about our lot. It could have been worse. Suppose "Blue Bandit" hit an iceberg then, all the story of the Titanic would have repeated itself."

"It's not funny, you know?"

"Oh, come on, you heard the captain. There is nothing serious to worry about."

"Great reassurance", muttered Gabriel.

Captain O'Hara's weather predictions turned out to be correct. The storm proved not to be so strong and no thunder disturbed the roaring of the waves. The only frightening thing about it was the mist that remained in the atmosphere. It had surrounded the ocean, like a girdle of vapor, cluttering the vessel with its white floating walls. Black clouds were silently marching in the west direction. Like sad knights of a forgotten era, they followed the night on their black foamy stallions, while the stars were desperately trying to pierce the darkness and bid them goodbye.

By the time the moon appeared on the sky, the sea had calmed down and there were no signs of her

restlessness. Gabriel had left Uriah's room. He had calmed himself and apologized for his burst of anger, then went to rest for the night. Left completely by himself, Uriah was now analysing the manuscript, looking all over again on the drawing. Meanwhile, in his own cabin, Gabriel was busy reading some journals he had bought on land.

I have to find out the truth, Uriah desperately repeated in his mind. The truth about the life of man on earth...

After eleven o'clock in the night, Uriah closed the manuscript and took from his pocket the notebook he had begun as a journal. He started writing, like he always did when he wanted to clear his mind of all the negative vibes.

November 6, 2016

A storm has visited the deck of Blue Bandit, but our vessel is a fantastic old sea wolf and it showed no signs of fear or cowardice. It fought bravely and won against the dark forces of nature. Now, the ship heads for Palestine without being deterred by any obstacle. Nevertheless, there is one obstacle I strongly loathe, the obstacle that the French call ennui.

I am so bored. I wish I had a beautiful book in my hands to read from cover to cover. The days pass uneventfully, and I am so tired by all the routine. In the morning we have breakfast, then lunch and supper. When I am not in the dining room, I stroll along the deck with Gabriel, as he is my only companion when Captain O'Hara is not around. Oh, the Captain is a wonderful fellow and sometimes our conversations are witty and saucy provided he doesn't bring his Katarina in our discussions, but I long to set my foot on the Palestinian ground, and

to feel the burning sand, and smell the balmy fragrance of the Jordan River, of the desert. I wonder what we will find at the end of our destination. I am very concerned whether our journey turns to be successful or not. I am very confident in my star and in my good Fortuna. But still, there is a little imp of doubt and it can't be denied. What if it's all a delusion? What if Gabriel's right? No, it couldn't possibly be so. But then hope can also be trickery; if not why was hope put inside Pandora's box, a box filled with evil plagues? Were the Greeks right to assume that hoping too much and in vain harms the soul? No, my case is different. I am not hoping. I am certain. I am certain that my father's theories were right, that Jon Gos' book presented the truth. It's just my boredom speaking, this restlessness caused by not busying my mind with lectures and interesting books.

Oh, how bored am I. I almost wish it had been a real frightening storm, one that would smash the waves into billions of particles and would toll the alarm of the vessel's engines. Frankly, that would have woken me from this torpid sensation of languor. What if I stopped writing to burst into Gabriel's cabin and shout in his ear: "Hey, I think something has cracked inside the vessel. I can see a thread of water gurgling from the floor. We are about to sink and go down like mice"? That would definitely startle Mr. Gabriel Archer. It would be amusing to see his features stretching tight and his nerves collapsing like a castle of sand. Luckily, I am no mischievous person and I wish no one harm, least to my friend.

Now everything has got back to normal, or at least for the sailors. For me, everything begins. The storm is about to unleash its force, although outside the sky looks calmer. I hope no misfortune will ail our disposition and

our journey in particular. I heard the captain saying to one of his stewards that in a week's time, the boat would reach the coastlines of the eastern Mediterranean region. I can hardly wait for this to happen. I am like a hungry and thirsted individual who is kept alive by the thought of reaching an oasis.

If I close my eyes I see myself and Gabriel in the country, once called Ethiopia. We are there, on land, among the people of Palestine, breathing the balmy air and feasting our eyes on the beauty of the land of Israel. We have reached our goal. We are descending inside the hollows where all the secrets of mankind have lain hidden for centuries. It is now time for the Truth of Eternity to come to the surface, and to be brought to light. And she is holding my hand, forever with me, both in thoughts and actions. We are descending the sacred Valley where two becomes one, and one means two. She is walking by my side and her black hair is fluttering in the breeze, touching my face and my body. And I look at her and she turns her eyes to me. How dark and bright are those eyes of hers, and how much she resembles...me. Yes, I can see my own figure, my own features mingling with hers, until our beings become indistinguishable. I part my lips and call her name softly.

"Andromeda....Andromeda...Andromeda...I am here. Where are you?"

Her lips quiver, but no sound comes.

"Andromeda..." I repeat my call, beckoning her to speak, to answer.

Sadness invades my soul as I look to her. Sadness and the silence of her mortal frame...She tries to answer and opens her mouth to speak. Only the echo of my own words fills the valley, and then is heard no more. Silence

engulfs us, gnawing at our chests; and still, I feel her soul calling me from within the ribcage. She looks into my eyes, and I slightly nod. I have heard. I have understood. Smiling, she disappears before my eyes, and I too disappear. And here I am, on board of the Blue Bandit. It has all been a fleeting vision, a daydream woven by the mystery of the night, by the mystery of life itself. She is no longer by my side and I am completely alone. No female voice fills the silence of the cabin; no dark locks cover my body with their silken coverlet.

I raise my eyes from the diary and look through the round window. Outside, only the waves roar louder, and the seagulls fly and fly, hovering over the glistening and feverish mirror of the calmed sea. I smile. Now the storm has moved inside of me.

"It has begun..."

VIII

"I hear the crickets singing so joyfully while my heart is sad. They are singing the charms of nature and as they sing these little tiny insects are asserting their freedom, while I am confined within these walls of cold brick. I have nothing but a crack in the wall, the dividing line between the outside world and my confinement. It is night. I watch the clouds passing swiftly through the ivory threads of the sparkling stars. And it is only me who sees those dark riders...The rest of the Ethiopians are much too busy enjoying their life on earth rather than casting their eyes on the firmament above. It is cold. And the night air fills my lungs. Nature is so powerful while I am so powerless. And where are my songs? They do not longer resound over the valley of Ethiopia, and the strings of my harp lie broken in the dust. Where are my songs that once filled me with joy? Where is my strength?"

Andromeda sighed deeply, lowering her head. Still, no tear fell from her eyes. She had decided not to cry, but it was so hard to refrain from thinking over her sorrows. Her wounded heart felt so heavy inside her chest, and the silence, the loneliness were unbearable. For three days and two nights, the princess had been captive in her father's dungeon. The cell was small and musty, and it was cold in there. It had a small iron grate over which the moon glided majestically, without pitying the fate of all the mortals of this earth. Far away, the city of Ethiopia lay

quiet upon the rocky hills, and only the roar of the sea fell like a thunder across the stillness of the night.

"How beautiful the crickets sing", whispered Andromeda, "and tomorrow I shall not hear them anymore. Tomorrow there are many sounds I will cease to hear. I will cease to hear the murmur of the Jordan River as it wavers across the fertile bank of Palestine, or the slight somersault of the gnats. The lotus will bloom and other girls will admire its beauty. But that doesn't pain me as much as the thought of never seeing..."

For a moment she had meant to say Cetus but that would be a lie. The face that had appeared before her eyes was not that of Cetus. It was Perseus who had protected her from her father and not Cetus.

"I wonder what has become of him. And to think that I have been the cause of all his misfortunes..."

Tears flooded the eyes of the princess and how she wept. She didn't shed tears because she was condemned to death, she wept because she wanted Perseus to live and she feared he had already met his death. The horror of not knowing what happened to the man who had been her only loyal friend was unbearable. She was aware that on the following morning she was to be sacrificed to Keto, the shark whale that plundered the waters of the Jordan River.

"Will he also be sacrificed to Keto or the beast has already devoured him?"

But she didn't know the answer and the guards who guarded her cell refused to tell her, having been forbidden not to address a word to the prisoner. Since the day her father had given the cruel sentence, Andromeda was no longer the princess of Ethiopia but an ordinary outlaw.

Deep in her heart, the girl was much aggrieved by the way her parents had reacted. She thought she was a loved child, but apparently power prevailed over her. It was all about the royal prestige. She even hoped she would be forgiven for her misconduct, but apparently her father wanted to set her as an example and to punish her like he would have punished a common slave. Andromeda had offended the crowned heads of Ethiopia. Her fists clenched and hit the hard surface of the stony wall. She couldn't stand it any longer, and bitter tears fell from her dark pupils. She fell to her knees and cursed the lot of womanhood.

The guards didn't hurry to rush in the cell. They might not even hear her or they pretended not to hear her. But at that moment she gave a shriek of surprise. A shadow had fallen unexpectedly over her. She thought she was alone and neither did she hear footsteps approaching her solitary confinement. But nevertheless it stood there behind her. A human being, illumined by the moonbeams... She turned in fright, fearing her time has arrived. Words died on her lips. She had meant to plead for her life, to request another meeting with the royal family, as she was not prepared for what was about to come. But behind the iron grate stood the figure of a most peculiar man. She hadn't seen him before. Moreover, he seemed a foreigner and not an Ethiopian. He had a shaggy dark hair, dark beard, and very dark pupils. Everything was dark about him.

"Do not be afraid," the stranger whispered.

His voice was strong and deep, and the way he pronounced the words was fascinating. It was as if fire melted into ice and the ice burst into a ravaging ocean. The princess was flabbergasted. Hypnotized, as if she

were facing a snake, she remained glued on the spot waiting for his reaction.

"Do not be afraid," he repeated almost hissing. "I have not come to hurt you."

It could seem strange, but Andromeda believed him and came closer to the iron grate. Their eyes met, and in the stranger's dark pupils there flickered a light the woman thought she had seen in another one's gaze. Perseus would often look at her that way, but he was not Perseus. The man that was now standing in front of her, Andromeda had never seen before. He was so dark, yet his skin was olive or yellowish. And when the moon light fell over his visage, he became silvery white, as if he were an enchanted ghoul that had just risen from the mysteries of the Ethiopian night. She could not tell if he was human or a spirit. And his lips were curled into a rapturous smile. She could feel his breath. Dizziness, voracity, lust...It tasted like wine. But the man was not drunk. His gaze was clear and vigorous. He was piercing her soul. Literary...He was looking at her with the eyes of a lion. No one has looked at her like this. No one...

"Who are you?" she asked.

He grinned, trying to simulate smiling. Then, he sighed and his eyes shot arrows of fire. Andromeda felt in the heavy silence a difficult struggle that was taking place inside of him. When he decided to speak, he had regained his composure.

"It doesn't matter who I am."

"It matters for me."

"You will not understand anyway."

"Try me."

"What I am today, yesterday I was not, and tomorrow I shall never be. I always change in time, like

the water which runs through the fingers, and in the process its streams break in thousands of rivulets which fall down. I have only come to tell you that I will always be by your side. Even when you do not see me...No matter what..."

She had listened, and yet she failed to understand.

"You speak like Perseus. He also conceals his heart in a web of weird words. How strangely it is, but you remind me so much of him, and yet there is nothing in you similar with him. His eyes are blue and green at the same time; yours are black as this night. His hair is like honey or like the autumn leaves; yours is as black as the deepest void. Everything is so dark about you, and yet I can see the light inside your human frame. I cannot understand you, but it matters less. So, you haven't come to set me free? Perhaps I am dreaming, and right now, from moment to moment you are to fade away."

The tone of Andromeda's voice was now ironical.

"I cannot interfere in things of men, at least not physically. I am only the keeper of God's secrets and the key to your freedom lies in your power to produce. Even if I can't unlock the doors that keep you in, I can show you the path outside. Still, you have to be on the verge of dying, when the human frame opens the gates to what lies hidden within. Then I would return by your side and you will have to make your choice. Till then, any change at all may alter the entire course of mankind. Even the fact that I am talking to you now may have serious consequences. I shouldn't be here. But I couldn't stay away. I was watching you and I heard you crying and the sound of such sadness tore my heart apart. And I have come, despite time and space. You must be careful. There is a shadow who lingers in the darkness, waiting to prey

upon you. You must fight him. I have seen him in the forest and in the royal palace too."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

His expression got milder.

"I am here to bring you comfort, Alexandra. You mustn't cry. Everything happens for a reason. Everything has a higher purpose."

"You called me, Alexandra. My name is Andromeda."

"Alexandra was the name of my wife. You look so much like her."

"She is no longer alive?"

"No. She died. I guess all good things come to an end."

"I am sorry."

"No, you shouldn't be sorry. You see, when my Alexandra died, I was furious. I was mad at God for taking her away from me, I was mad at everybody. It only brought me comfort to witness her ghostly visits. Yes, I kept seeing her from time to time. And I swore that when my time of death would come, I would join her. And I did."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying that life and death are just journeys through time and space, and we people are the travelers who wander on the dusty roads of fate."

His speech made no sense at all and she couldn't understand anything. But strange as it may be, Andromeda still believed him. She didn't think him mad or drunk. She believed him. There was something in his eyes and in his voice, although she couldn't quite tell, that reminded her of Perseus. Of course, in appearance the two men were very different like the sun and the moon, but there was something of Perseus in this man.

"Where have you come from?" she asked.

"From far away...From a world that has not yet been born, although it has always existed..."

"Is your world beautiful?"

"Beauty lies in the light of the soul. Just wait and one day you can decide on your own whether my world is beautiful or not."

"Do you mean I will live there?"

"I cannot tell you more."

"Will you take me there?"

"You have to find the path by yourself."

"The only path I am taking soon is the path to death", she said sadly.

"Yes and no. There is no death in this world. Our life is an eternal journey, like I have already told you. We wander from century to century, with no memory at all of what we have been in the past, but still the soul remembers. It only waits to be unlocked."

"You are strange, foreigner, and your words creep upon my soul like the serpents of doom. How come you are here? How come the guards haven't seen you?" she asked, controlling her heartbeat.

"I can't be seen because I don't exist in your time. I am just only a vapor, a representation of my future self."

"It means that I am dreaming, doesn't it?"

"No, it only means that I am here for your eyes and senses only. Besides, nobody can stand in the way of a strong willed man. I know little tricks. I can dodge unseen in any place if I want to."

Andromeda smiled. Strangely, for the first time she had been in this cell she gave a beautiful amusing smile. He smiled back at her.

"Alexandra used to smile like that."

"How funny it is that we are having this conversation. It's just like being around Perseus. He keeps following me around and everywhere I go, I feel his presence."

"You speak so much of him", the stranger remarked. "Is he dear to you? Do you love him?"

Andromeda blushed and shook vehemently her head.

"You are audacious, stranger, and you should learn from the owls to listen more and speak less."

The stranger smiled again.

"My innocent girl, how precious is this thing called love for you. You are ready to die to defend this feeling, and yet you don't even know what you are dying for."

"I know what love is", Andromeda rebuked him.

"What is it then?"

She thought for a moment then replied very sure of what she was saying.

"Love is like music. It appears out of nowhere, when you least expect it, and once you hear it, it never goes away. It stays with you, and when you don't listen to its harmony, you are plunged into chaos and despair. And still, even amidst sorrow and pain, the music faintly echoes in the memory of your lost bliss."

The stranger listened attentively. Then, a beautiful smile spread across his face.

"It sounds so beautiful when you say it. I almost wish I heard its music too. For me, love is like a canvas, where eternity paints the colours of a man's soul in search of the truth. You see, for me, love is knowledge. I used to discuss with Alexandra all the secrets of this universe, and that was music for our hungry mind."

"How was she like?" asked Andromeda, curious to learn more about the woman loved by the mysterious stranger.

"She was like an unusual and exciting spectacle. With a single touch, she would revolutionize my world, and I loved her madly, selfishly, and almost devouringly."

Andromeda looked at him spellbound.

"Were there other women in your life after she died?"

"I have never been interested in another woman. If I remarried, I had only done that to fool myself into believing that she was still alive, but enough talking about me. Tell me please, does that Perseus of yours love you, too?"

Glowering, Andromeda retorted.

"Have I said that I love him? No, I do not. I am in love with another man. And Perseus...I guess...Oh, you shouldn't inquire further."

The stranger laughed, spreading more darkness and more coldness around. Andromeda shivered. She began to like him less.

"This man you say you love, where is he now? Why isn't he by your side?"

"The king has forbidden anyone to come near me. But I fear the worst. Perhaps he has also suffered the anger of my father, and is lying now in a dungeon, brokenhearted and embittered. Or perhaps he is already dead..."

Tears gathered in her beady eyes, and the words died on her lips. The dark man in front of her looked at her with interest, fascinated by the emotional reactions that had triggered the apparition of tears in her eyes. He was drawn by her sadness, and unable to resist any

longer, the stranger thrust his hand between the iron bars and reached her cheek. He caressed her gently. His fingers felt like ice, as if blood had never flown inside his veins. The princess shrugged, but didn't withdraw. She remained there, spellbound and fascinated by that mysterious stranger.

"Do not waste your tears on people who are unworthy of your heart."

Andromeda pulled herself away from him, and when she spoke, all the dignity of her loving heart and the fury of hearing such words combined together into a harsh reprimand.

"He is worthy of my heart."

The stranger smiled again.

"Thank you for feeling like that. All this time, I...I mean, he must have blamed himself for not succeeding in getting you out of this dungeon or for not keeping Cetus away from you."

"Cetus? I hope he regrets his evildoings."

"Trust me. He is well and safe, as he managed to extricate himself from this dangerous situation by denying any connection with you. Cetus couldn't care more if you live or die...If I managed to find a way to get to you, so could he have found. Nothing stands in the way of a man when he has decided to see the woman he loves. But Cetus loves no one but himself...You should have known that by now."

"Do you know Cetus?"

"I know every people alive, and all the people that are about to be born."

"But how is that possible?"

"Many things are possible; it is only the human mind that has decided to consider them impossible."

"How do I know that you are not telling lies?"

"You don't. You just have to take my word."

"Can you see inside people's hearts and can you read minds?"

"I can do many things. I can show you the Valley of Kings where the souls of all your ancestors wander between heaven and earth."

"Show me your soul", she softly required.

There was a moment of silence. Andromeda could feel his breath and hear his heartbeats.

"Look into my eyes and tell me what do you see."

Andromeda looked into the pitch darkness of his pupils. It was like being swallowed inside a marsh. She was groping in that darkness, unable to take away her eyes, when she saw the pale figures of former kings of Ethiopia as well as peasants and slaves who were wandering across the green valley. They saw her gazing at them, and they all called for justice, accusing her of being alive. She felt horrified and closed her eyes, thus distancing herself from everything.

"I didn't see your soul", she whispered.

"Look again", he ordered her.

And she looked, unable to resist him. This time she saw the stranger sitting on a bench. He was wearing a red blouse and dark trousers. He was looking at her and she knew she had been in love with him all his life. Then she saw him again in a luxurious mansion. They were alone, dancing in a huge room, under the light of a huge chandelier. And he was laughing and kissing her, and she was kissing him back. He called her Alexandra, and she knew that was her name. And the scene changed rapidly, and he was now sitting in front of a desk, writing fervently. She was gazing at him, like in a dream of

heavenly bliss. When he finished, he showed her. It was a story he had just created. He read it aloud. It was a story about them, although he had used other names for the characters. And she kissed him happily. And then she saw herself giving birth, and she knew she wouldn't make it. She felt his grief, his despair, his terror. And then, everything went black. And when she woke up, she was another woman. She was crossing a street and when she looked up she saw him. He was standing at a window, looking at her. He looked different, but she was different too. It was only his soul that never changed, the same soul she was contemplating now from behind the iron bars of her dungeon.

"What was that?", she asked in awe.

"Did you like what you saw?"

"I am not sure what I've seen."

"It's okay. Your soul already knows."

His voice was so comforting, so familiar, and yet so distant.

"Who are you?"

He smiled but didn't utter a word.

"Tell me, please."

"I have already told you."

"At least, tell me who I am."

"Haven't you seen it already in my eyes?"

"I don't understand what I've seen. Tell me who I am. You should know better. What do I feel right now and what am I thinking about?"

He looked into her eyes and his firm voice echoed in the air.

"You are scared because you are so close of death, and the Valley of Kings awaits your arrival. You will get there and then remember, you are to make a choice. Keep

that in mind. Of course, you are also worried because you don't know what morning will bring, and you are afraid you'll die without knowing if the man you love is safe. Right now, your thoughts orbit around him, and the more you try to locate him, you fail."

Andromeda leaned against the dungeon's wall. She was tired even to question why Cetus and Lilytha had both acted so ingratiatingly. But the stranger was right. He had seen right through her. Yes, there was something more she desperately wanted to know.

"Stranger, if you know so much, please let me know! What happened to Perseus, to the poor harpist you must at least have heard of?"

"He will meet his fate."

"Is it a good or a bad fate?"

"Meeting you was the best thing that could have happened to him."

It was Andromeda's turn to smile. The smile didn't last long, as she remembered something the stranger had said.

"What is this shadow that threatens me?"

"My darling girl, when two people join in true love, something unique happens, something extraordinary good, and evil can't stand to see that."

"You mean the shadow is an evil god?"

"You will soon find out. That is all I can say."

The princess understood he won't talk more.

"Thank you", she said, "Thank you for coming. You should leave now. The dawn is approaching and soon the guards will come to fetch me."

"The guards have no power over me", he said mockingly.

"What are you then?"

He didn't reply.

"May I at least learn what your name is?" she asked him.

The shadow of a smile died on his lips.

"I've had many names. I even lost track of them. I was once named Perseus..."

Andromeda's heart skipped a beat. A strange sensation seized her entire being, as if she was diving into a mesmerizing dream.

"Your name was Perseus?"

"It was, indeed."

"Just like my Perseus."

The stranger nodded gravely.

"What name have you had after being called Perseus?"

"Leonid."

"I have never heard of this name before."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"It means lion."

"My name means 'defender of men' and 'courage'."

"Your name means whatever you want it to mean."

"And after Leonid, how were you called?"

"Uriah."

"What does it mean?"

"It means God is my light."

"What God is your light?"

"The God that made both me and you, and this world, and all the mysteries of life..."

"I see...How would you like to be called?"

"For instance, you could call me Perseus, if you like."

Andromeda was startled, leaping back with excitement, and she interrupted the stranger.

"My friend, the harpist, I was talking to you about is called Perseus", she whispered. "There can be no other Perseus beside him. You do know him, don't you?"

"Yes, I do", he said smilingly."I know him very well."

"I beg of you, you don't have to tell me all, just something that would ease my mind and soul. Is he alive?"

The stranger scowled and his eyebrows rose menacingly as he frowned and kept silence.

"Please, tell me", she implored him. "If you care for me, tell me."

"All right", the stranger agreed. "I will tell you. It has already happened and you can't change anything. Perseus is about to die. His moments are numbered, and he knows it. Armed soldiers have searched the palace up and down, still they haven't found him. They have placed two guards in the palace wing for slaves. The two officials are bearing a royal decree. Perseus is summoned to appear before the king of Ethiopia. Every slave who dared to say that Perseus was a faithful subject was speared, the soldiers following the royal command. He even lost his entire family."

Bewildered, the princess was shaken by the news, but after a moment she sat on a stool near the iron grate.

"You are lying, stranger. Perseus has neither family, nor slaves. He himself is a slave."

"Then you don't know Perseus, for he has both family and slaves. Ever since he was bought as a slave, the only family he has ever had is you. And he appeared with you before the king. His slaves are all the feelings and thoughts he has for you. And he showed them to the king when he chose to protect you. And he is dead

now because you are about to die and as you have been speared by pain, so has been his soul. He has been visited by the soldiers of death, and whatever fate awaits you he will always share it."

Andromeda cried and collapsed on the floor. She was convulsively weeping. Through her clamorous sobs she heard the comforting voice of the stranger. He was trying to ease her pain, but her sorrow deepened until it turned into a fit of despair.

"You mustn't cry. What have I told you? You shall see him again. Trust me."

"But how if he is dead and I am to die tomorrow?" cried Andromeda in despair.

"Life is a mysterious thing. Soon you will learn its power. I am offering you the truth. You shall see your Perseus again. My eyes have seen behind the veils of darkness, behind the mysteries of your world. Soon you are to be reunited with your pair and step together in the light of your existence. Down you will descend into the Valley of the Kings, and when you arrive at the gates of a garden, the shadow I've talked to you about will be waiting. He will plead with you. Remember not to take him with you when the gates will be opened before you. The evil shadow will lie that he is too tired and wishes to see his Father. You mustn't believe him. He's just trying to stain the purity of light and to destroy God's essence. Remember not to take him with you, or else everything we'll be destroyed; and we shall never meet in any lifetime. Even if the shadow threatens you with his wrath, saying that he would have his revenge and you wouldn't want to know how burning his hate could be, do not believe him. Remember my words. This comes from the man who was once called Perseus."

"Once?" she whispered, still sobbing.

"Once", he answered.

"You are him, aren't you?"

He smiled again.

"I love you", he whispered. "I have always loved you."

"I know. I love you too."

Andromeda rose to meet his eyes.

"But how do people call you now, under this form you've appeared before me?"

The stranger, who was once known as Perseus, smiled.

"Just think of me as a lion which came from the desert of eternity to see once again the face of the most beautiful flower that God created in all His mercy and glory."

"God...? Who is God?"

"My father, as well as yours...You will get to know Him in the future."

"But I have already a father."

"He is not your real father. Don't ask me more. The future will answer all of your questions."

"I am afraid my future has gone shorter. My father is planning to feed me to Keto."

"He won't do that."

"Still, I am going to die, aren't I?"

"And I am telling you that it is only the beginning."

"But I will die tomorrow..."

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

The stranger fished a blue bird out of his pocket. It was made of a block of sapphire and its eyes were two

beams of black amber. He slid the bird through the iron grate.

"Take it", he said. "This is the secret of eternity."

"The secret of eternity?" she asked aghast.

"Yes. What you're holding now in your hands is not an ordinary bird jewel. It wasn't manufactured in your time and space, and yet it has broken the laws of time since it is resting in your palm. It shouldn't have existed here, but there it is. And now it belongs to eternity."

Andromeda didn't understand a thing, but her heart confided in the stranger.

"It is beautiful", she said petting the blue bird.

"What kind of bird it is?"

"It's a Lalage. The name means the song of the spring."

"Thank you. It is very lovely."

"I must leave you now", he whispered. "But we shall soon see each other again, and when we do, remember to recognize my soul."

"I will never forget you."

"Farewell, my love, till we meet again."

She believed him. Her eyes followed his silhouette dissolving into the night. The blue bird rested softly in her lap. Andromeda raised it to her lips and pressed one last kiss upon the tiny blue head. The Lalage reminded her of the sandpiper Perseus had brought her. A sharp pain pierced her heart, and the face of Perseus appeared before her eyes. It was as if she could touch him. His soft hair, those blue eyes, his smile, the melodies he used to play...Everything about him was so lovely, and yet, she couldn't tell him how loved he was. Yet, his eyes seemed to understand what her heart was trying to conceal.

"Perseus", she whispered his name.

In the dungeon, under the watchful eye of the distant moon, Perseus had come to stay. And his harp, invisible for the naked eye, sang about the Valley of the Kings. And Andromeda heard the fascinating tunes and fell back in time, revisiting the scene when Perseus had appeared before her the day she met Cetus for the first time. And Andromeda closed her eyes, recalling the ghosts of the past days to return and dwell in the house of her memory.

It was a day in July and the Ethiopian sun burned violently, rolling its ball of fire across the Jordan River. Andromeda was in the Royal Gardens throwing crumbs of bread at the storks.

"The poor creatures... Look how they're craning their necks. It must have been a long journey and the food was scarce."

Her father had told her that storks flew to Africa from their Northern countries where heavy snows fell and the wind could easily freeze even a stout man. She had listened spellbound, completely absorbed and trying to imagine the coverlet of sparkling snow. Andromeda had never seen snow and she thought that it looked like a white cold desert.

One stork came closer and the princess tried to touch it with the fingers but the bird opened its beak and hadn't Andromeda withdrawn her hand the bird would have bit it.

"You naughty one", the princess scolded the bird. "You bite the hand that feeds you. Just like a ravenous snake."

"Perhaps she just wants to kiss your hand", resounded unexpectedly a voice from behind her back.

Andromeda gave a short laugh. She had immediately recognized Perseus. She threw to the birds

the last crumbs of bread and rose from the bench she had been sitting on. Then, on turning around, she saw him. Right before her the harpist stood proud and erect like a marble statue. In the morning light, his eyes were bluer than ever and he resembled one of the icy gods whom her father told her they were to be found in the Northern Countries.

"Have you also been brought by a stork?" she jested.

"Would you feed me if I told you I was?"

"What kind of food do you need?"

"The music of your company..."

She laughed again, adding that the only music she knew at the moment would be the sound of her hands slapping his face as a due punishment for such an audacity. The slave joined his mistress in laughter, and they laughed as they used to do when they were kids. Unfortunately, the merriment did not last for long, and Andromeda ordered the harpist to return to the slaves' wing of the palace. Perseus' eyebrows rose menacingly, but he turned to leave. He always obeyed her, even though his soul was as untamed and wild as ever. Her eyes followed his tall silhouette until he was out of sight. Neither could she linger any longer there. The princess had to return in her chambers to get ready for lunch.

She was heading for the palace when she heard her father's voice. She turned to greet him. The king was not alone. A young man accompanied him. Andromeda slyly scrutinized him. He was wearing a gauzy robe of white. The Roman style, she thought. And the robe had golden threads and a heavy sash girdled the waist from where a sword stood hanging.

A soldier, she thought again, he must be a soldier.

The soldier's feet were stepping firmly on the ground, and he neither spoke nor looked around. He was respectfully paying attention to the king's words.

He hasn't seen me yet.

His eyes were fixed on the king and as His Majesty was speaking, the young soldier listened with deference.

Andromeda smiled and she advanced towards her father, wanting to greet him. When the princess reached the two men, she graciously bowed.

"Greetings, my king, and may the gods bestow their blessings upon you!"

Her voice had a majestic tone, and she spoke without looking at the young soldier, although she felt an irresistible wish to meet his eyes.

"Greetings, my child!" the king replied.

A warm smile had flourished upon the king's lips. He was gloating in the beautiful scenery of his daughter's beauty. With pride he presented Andromeda to the young soldier.

"General Cetus, this is Princess Andromeda, my one and only daughter!"

The general kneeled before the princess, as if it was then he noticed her. His ivory body bent like a triumphal arch over the dust which received his shadow. And in the sun his hair shone bright as if it were locks of golden amber.

Perseus' hair shines the same, even brighter. And he never bows before me...Not like this...He bows in jest and he never means it. He is too proud and annoying...But if he were here, and if he stood beside Cetus, I guess Perseus would make an even better soldier. If he carried a sword, I could take the weapon and challenge him to battle. If I do this with Cetus, he will never fight me, but Perseus would fight me anytime.

Her mind was reeling. The hair of Cetus blinded her, confounding the image of two men set apart by social class and age. The heart of Andromeda stirred from the motionless of sleep, because a sleep her life had been till then. The stir went slightly dum-dum Dum, and then it was throbbing wildly filling the girl with awe lest it could be heard by unwanted ears. Her will was bent as if she were a harp just like those that Perseus would command to sing, and how loudly she was now singing.

Trying to compose herself, she bid the soldier to rise from the ground. Her voice had trembled a little but the two men didn't notice. General Cetus rose. When their eyes met something peculiar happened. The dark pupils of Andromeda were suddenly flooded by the beauty of the sapphire blue pupils. The eyes of Perseus reflected the clarity of the sea which one can only admire on a sunny weather when the serene sky impresses the heavenly light upon the body of waves and foam. In a word, the princess of Ethiopia found herself mesmerized by the beauty of one pair of eyes, and that pair belonged not to a prince or a king but to a simple slave who hidden by a shrubbery, had carelessly trod upon a dry branch.

A flush of red coloured her cheeks and the princess turned her head towards a bed of lovely roses. She was furious with Perseus.

How dare he spy on me like that? He's always prying.

Yet, she couldn't disclose him in front of her father and of the beautiful general. For several long minutes, her gaze was fixed upon the roses and the flowers that were the only silent witnesses of her first symptoms of acknowledged love.

The King Cepheus resumed his walking and the general followed him, bidding goodbye to Andromeda

who silently remained near the bed of roses.

When she was completely alone and no one could hear her, she whispered his name.

“Perseus...”

She sounded upset. Perseus did not reply. She called him again and again. A silence followed and in the distance, she saw the menacing shadow of the words she wouldn't dare to speak aloud.

“Perseus”, she whispered again and the name fluttered like a flightless bird between the cage-like walls of her prison.

Andromeda felt a sharp pain in her heart, a sort of pain she had never encountered before. It was the horror of hopelessness. Despite what the stranger had told her, how could she possibly see again the one she loved when the one she loved was dead or at least about to die? Oh, how she wished to be free again, riding with Pegasus just like she rode the day she ran into the general a short time after her father had acquainted them with each other.

She had gone for a riding along the Jordan River, and Cetus was patrolling over the region. Her white Pegasus halted opposite Cetus' dark stallion. The general lowered his head and Andromeda greeted him by raising her arm.

“Where are your guards, princess?” he enquired, noticing no one around.

“I always ride alone”, the answer came on a proud tone. “I am my own guardian.”

“I strongly recommend you to be more cautious. Does the king allow his daughter such a conduct?”

Andromeda laughed, and for the first time General Cetus didn't know how to react. He was puzzled and

taken back by that pearly laughter which rain on him like a shower of embarrassment. And for the first time, the general blushed.

"I forgive your ignorance", the princess commenced, "since my father told me that you arrived here from Rome. But you are now an Ethiopian and what is happening in Rome may not happen at all in Ethiopia. I do not know how the Roman princesses behave but I am not afraid of anyone and I can defend myself in case of danger. Moreover, there is no man on this land who would dare to defy my father and raise his hand against him. Firstly, he would not live to see another day; secondly, I fight like a lioness."

"Half Roman", said Cetus softly.

"What?"

"I am half Roman. My mother is Greek."

Andromeda stared at him, and the pause of seriousness was cut short by a healthy outburst of vigorous laughter.

"Well", she began talking after she stopped from laughing. "It means you have known many princesses of Rome and Greece, and if they were forbidden to ride alone and enjoy their freedom, then I wouldn't want to live anywhere but Ethiopia."

"I have only offered a well intentioned piece of advice."

Andromeda smiled amused.

"Are you scolding me, General?"

"Pardon me, princess", he faltered, breathing heavy. "I am only worried for your safety."

"You don't need to be. I repeat that the people of Ethiopia are my faithful subjects and mean me no harm. Even if I found myself in a perilous situation, I would know to fight with honour for my life. I am the daughter

of a king and the future ruler of Ethiopia.”

The general nodded approvingly, and the princess read in his eyes the words he would not have dared speak aloud. In the turbulent sea of his pupils, a roaring flame of admiration had burst wildly. He was actually seeing her for what she was, not a girl, neither a woman, nor a rebel who likes to do things her own way, but a ruler to be. She flushed again, and in an attempt to turn the attention from her, she changed the subject.

“You have a fine stallion, General. From the Royal Stables, I assume. What’s his name, if I am allowed to know?”

“Pawn”

Andromeda laughed heartily.

“Do you play chess, General?”

“Yes, it’s my favourite mind sport.”

“Mine, too, besides reading of course. I would like to compete against you and analyse the skills of your brainpower, General. So far, no one has ever defeated me at chess.”

And then again the image of Perseus flashed before her eyes. They have often played together in the stillness of the summer evenings, and if he didn’t defeat her, she still didn’t win. All their matches had ended in a draw. But Andromeda couldn’t say to General Cetus that she had been playing chess with a slave.

General Cetus giggled merrily.

“It seems to me that you’ve found your match. No one has been able to defeat me either. Princess Andromeda, I will be honoured to play against you. I’ve been playing chess for as long as I know. Life itself is a game of odds and chances where only the fittest survive. I will take your king in a jiffy.”

"We shall see about that. Don't count your storks until you trap them."

The chess game began right on that day although both players were not even aware that the first movement had been done and an invisible hand had already set their pawns face to face. Next time the general went to the palace, the princess invited him into her chambers. And he went. General Cetus was a man of his word and he stepped over the threshold of Andromeda's chambers with the sole intention of playing chess. And chess they played.

The game began in the evening and went on till night fell over the earth and torches were lit for the players to calculate their next movements. There was no winner that night and the game ended in a draw. But there were tremendous loses. They robbed each other hearts and they did not even realize. Neither Andromeda nor Cetus wanted to acknowledge the powerful sensation felt within. The game of chess fell into the pit of oblivion and Cetus only saw that all the stars of the kingdom of Ethiopia were shining in Andromeda's eyes as jewels fit for a crown, and Andromeda trembled as the halo of the sleeping sun sent its rays through the mirror of Perseus' blue pupils who was again behind a marble pillar, watching restlessly the movements of the chess players. He was always there, like a ghost one sees in a dream.

He is always on my tracks, hunting, lurking, protecting me... But never does he come near me... I wonder why.

She compelled herself not to think about him. His blue eyes dissolved in the air like fumes, and his presence grew encumbered by the other man's presence. Cetus was laughing unaware of Perseus, unaware that Andromeda was listening to him like in a dream where she was hiding

not to be spotted by the truth within her heart. The night continued in pleasant conversation and both of them indulged in drinking wine and feasting with fruits and smoked cheese. Sometimes their words got confused and they would burst into peals of laughter, and all the charms of youth floated in the air like a joyous giddiness.

Slaves were waving long palm leaves to keep the African gnats away from them, and other slaves kept bringing plates with more exotic fruits and exquisite deserts. In a corner, the melodious voice of an Egyptian lute player sang the delights of love and beauty. But the harp was silent, and only the eyes of the harpist were alive, hollering the cry of a soul reduced to silence. And the princess turned her gaze away in an attempt to forget the presence she again felt so near, the presence which burnt her heart leaving the scarlet letter of betrayal. More wine was brought, more fruit...

I want to forget, and I want to love...

And so it happened that a simple game of chess turned into a real banquet.

When daylight pierced the veils of night, the General's pawns had not yet captured the white queen. A similar fate was also shared by the princess' pawns. They were still brooding to find a way of taking the black king by surprise. But the white queen and the black queen remained unharmed. The players had decided to show mercy. The General rose from his seat and headed for the door and the princess accompanied him. Before he left the chambers, the woman took the man by the hand and she kissed him, sealing their fate with a fugitive token of affection at departure. He kissed her back and there they stood in a fierce embrace. Thus, the woman and the man faced the rising sun.

IX

When the prow of the vessel was pointing towards the speck of land that loomed in the horizon, the two friends saluted with cheers the contour of Palestine. An hour later, the ship reached the harbor. Uriah and Gabriel looked around with curiosity. There were thousands of people swarming to and fro. Some were selling almonds or bananas, others were crying in their mysterious gibberish. There were also plenty of gaunt and sun burnt men carrying huge knots of rope on their backs or oriental carpets on their shoulders. Men with keys in their hands were approaching each sailor coming out of the ship, and they offered to lodge them for a night or two.

"They always greet like this", O'Hara explained to the two British, "They simply jump like gnats on whoever steps on the land of Palestine. They are greedy little Jews, but there are also barbarians among them who wouldn't hesitate to cut your throats for even a morsel of food. They have been like this ever since my feet stepped on this land, and that was a very long time ago."

"The seven capital sins can be found in all nations, as well as their opposites, i.e. the seven virtues of the Soul. I think you are mistaken in calling them greedy Jews or barbarians."

Uriah's reproach made Captain Ralph O'Hara raise a skeptical eyebrow.

"I know what I know, lad."

"And I know what you don't know, captain", Uriah retorted smiling.

The Captain was not offended at all. He gave a healthy peal of laughter and patted Uriah on the shoulder. Meanwhile, in the harbor people were going up and down their business.

The men who jingled the bunch of keys in their hands were cottage owners, who for a living they were ready to lodge foreigners. But Uriah and Gabriel refused their offer and went to recover their car. They would drive till the nearest hotel and check in. After a proper meal and a nice shower, they would consider the matter carefully and decide what to do next. According to the internet, and to O'Hara's personal statement, the most convenient hotel was "Thalmuses".

"It is the best hotel in the area", the captain had assured them. I know the owner. Unlike these dirty Jews, Mika is a fine chap. Funny, he even reminds me of my Katarina."

And after one last long account of his unfortunate love, the captain had concluded his narrative stream with a hug and a good luck wish. Uriah and Gabriel decided to follow the captain's advice, and when they got on shore, the two friends bid Ralph O'Hara goodbye and disappeared from view.

"Perhaps I am not to see you any longer, just like I will never see my Katarina", they heard the Captain sobbing behind them.

"Don't worry, captain," Uriah shouted at him amused. "There is always another Katarina waiting to be discovered in the harbor of her life."

The Captain shook his head doubtfully, and that was the last image the two friends had of him as Queeny

left the main road and headed towards untrodden paths. They had to drive through rough scenery for almost an hour, but the captain had told them that the hotel's prices were low and so the two friends didn't complain. In fact, they were captivated by the wild and beautiful surroundings. Everything around them had a voice of its own. Driving through the narrow streets of a Middle Eastern country, the two British experienced a sort of elevation. Each brick, each house possessed secret language that seemed to enfold in a poem of visual images, and for the first time, both Uriah and Gabriel felt the calling of pristine nature throbbing in their veins.

When they arrived in front of a rocky hill, a gravel path opened before them, leading straight to a building they immediately assumed it had to be "Thalmuses". It didn't look like an ordinary hotel. It was more like a spacious, four storey house. Nevertheless, Uriah immediately liked the place, unlike Gabriel who kept complaining about the distance from the town center of Jaffa.

"We're not here as tourists", Uriah reminded him.

"Do you really have to rain on my parade all the time?"

"Only when I have to talk some sense into you", Uriah replied smiling.

Still muttering incomprehensively, Gabriel drove Queeny and parked it in front of the main entrance. There was no other car, which either meant there were no visitors at all, or that people had ridden a horse or a mule to the hotel. The two friends got out of the car, helped by no usher or other member of the staff.

"You know, I am beginning to think that my cousin, the captain, was right about the local people."

"Stop it, Gabriel. We are not in Kansas anymore, besides we can park our car without someone else's assistance."

"Yes, whatever."

When they entered the hotel, a tiny old woman rose from a crimson coated armchair where she had been dozing, and dragged her feeble feet towards them. Her wrinkled face and dazzlingly white hair caught the eye in a whirlwind of imagination. She appeared ageless, although time had heavily set its mark upon her. Uriah was fascinated, unlike Gabriel who stepped back, and avoided being much time in her vicinity.

"How do you do?" Uriah greeted.

She didn't speak English at all, but fortunately, there was no need of some acts of communication between the British and the Jewess. She showed them a piece of paper where the prices had been printed, and that set the entire affair. The real owner appeared later, still holding a towel in his hands. He had a robust countenance, and a joyful mood.

"Good evening, gentlemen", he thus greeted his new lodgers. "Sorry if I've kept you waiting. I've been busy in the kitchen."

His tenor like voice reverberated across the room.

"It's fine", they both assured him.

"We've already checked in", Uriah added.

"Oh, I see that you've met my mother. In her youth, she used to be more talkative, but after she became a widow, for the third time", Mika added and blinked at them, "she simply shunned herself from the world. She doesn't speak anymore."

"No problem", Uriah tried to assure him. "We managed to understand each other perfectly."

The Jew seemed thrilled and kept smiling at them.

"I am glad to see you here. My name is Mika Bernstein. *Shalom aleichem*⁵, my dear gentlemen."

"*Shalom aleichem!* We are pleased to meet you. My name is Uriah Reed and this is my companion, Mr. Gabriel Archer."

"It is an honour making your acquaintance."

The Jew gave them a curtly bow.

"I am sure you must be very tired after such a long and exhausting journey. I will lead you to your room and make sure you have everything you need."

The two British thanked him heartily for his hospitality, and followed him up a flight of stairs. All over the walls, there were Rembrandt's paintings. First, there was "Christ driving the Money-Changers from the Temple". Fascinating picture, indeed...Uriah looked mesmerized at Christ's face. It showed an unspeakable wrath, whereas the money-changers, although frightened by Christ's fury, were desperately trying to save their money. The portrait seemed authentic, a real life depiction, and not a Biblical reification of Christ's history. Even the "Portrait of a Scholar" showed no trace of having been forged. The scholar's penetrating gaze seemed just now to have been startled from the solace of study by the importunate visit of the two travelers. And the more they climbed the flight of stairs, the more Rembrandt paintings they encountered. There was "The Adoration of the Magi", and "The Incredulity of St. Thomas". And when they reached the first floor, they had to cross a little hall with more paintings hanging on the walls. Uriah and Gabriel could now admire "The Descent from the Cross" which was a unique canvas, depicting Christ's

5 Peace be upon you (Hebrew)

human frame in all the splendor of its mortal flaws. Also, the despair of the Holy Mother united in pain with the bereavement of any mother who had ever lost a son or a daughter. And then, there was "Abraham's Sacrifice", depicting the faithful love of the man who chooses the death of his son over the sin of disobeying God.

"Amazing", Uriah exclaimed. "The paintings seem so authentic. One could easily mistake them for the originals."

Mika laughed, but one could see that he was very pleased about that eulogy. The two British were very amusing. They kept staring at his canvases as if they were pieces of gold.

"No one can mistake something for being what it already is."

Uriah was flabbergasted.

"Are you telling me these are real Rembrandt paintings?"

"I don't like fake artifacts or imitations. There is nothing in my house unworthy of praise or value."

Gabriel looked at him incredulously, and despite Uriah's exaggerated enthusiasm, he liked Mika less and less, although he couldn't tell for sure what it was the exact reason for his dislike.

"But aren't you afraid that thieves may break in?" Gabriel dared to ask.

"They might try, some have indeed tried; still, none has succeeded. In the house of Mika, only those admitted by Mika himself, manage to get through the main entrance."

Gabriel suddenly began to feel uncomfortable, but Uriah was more and more intrigued. And when he saw the "Portrait of an old woman with spectacles" at the end

of the hall, he couldn't refrain from allowing a shiver to cross his spine, realizing how much the old woman in the painting resembled Mika's mother.

"It is amazing", Uriah heard Mika saying, "how portraits emulate life. One looks at a canvas, and it is like looking into a mirror. Each colour, each landscape, and each face tells you something you already know. It reveals the hidden truths of your being. And the reason I like Rembrandt is because the man is a genius, and every painting is a masterpiece. Don't you agree?"

Both Gabriel and Uriah nodded their heads and let themselves carried away by the spell of Mika's words.

"There you are", Mika said when they reached the door of their room. "The best chamber of Thalmuses..."

Gabriel and Uriah waited for Mika to unlock it, and when the door was open they stepped in.

"How do you like it, my gentlemen?"

"It is won..." answered Uriah, and stopped suddenly.

On the wall, above their beds, another Rembrandt painting mastered with its grandeur the entire room. That was the reason why Uriah halted, losing the thread of his words.

"The Return of the Prodigal Son", he whispered slowly. Nevertheless, Mika heard him.

"It's breathtaking, isn't it? I consider it to be Rembrandt's greatest achievement."

"Indeed."

Contemplating the canvas, Uriah did feel like a prodigal son, returning to the Holy Land to kneel before his father and to ask him to place the burden of the cross over his mortal shoulders. The figure of James Reed was there, symbolically lingering on the canvas, and he was

there too, trembling at the feet of the patriarch.

When Mika wished them good night and retreated downstairs, Uriah heard nothing. His eyes were filled with the beauty of a symbolic epiphany.

As for Gabriel, he entirely neglected the canvas. His eyes were analysing the room they had taken. It contained two beds, one big bathroom, and a balcony that opened to an orange grove.

Woken up from his revelry, Uriah realized that he was not alone in the room.

"How do you like it here?" he asked Gabriel.

Gabriel frowned and busied himself with unpacking his luggage.

"I feel like a boy scout visiting for the first time the Hermitage Museum." Gabriel mockingly remarked the moment he finished unpacking.

"You'll get to like it as soon as you become more acquainted with Palestine."

"Blimey, Uriah, I hate raining on your parade, but have you seen the hotel manager's mother? She looks like a ghoul, a corpse ready to descend to the valley of the shadows. It really sends me chills all over my spine. Not to mention the manager himself. He doesn't seem, well, how to put it, quite normal."

"Strange as it may sound, I like the old woman's face. It is rather peculiar, like a story that never gets to be told. It is only hastily scribbled and people pass by without taking time to notice the tiny paragraphs of a human life. She, too, was young, and maybe even beautiful, but time has kissed her brow and now she is only the empty vessel of the being she used to be. And her son, Mika, is a genuine art collector who loves the beauty of life. You should at least appreciate his love for art. As a matter of

fact, you should even recognize that Mika is an original."

Gabriel scowled, but his friend didn't seem to notice. After unpacking, Uriah took a shower and put on a silk gown. It was warm, and the desert air filled the night with hot vapours. There was something in the vibrations of the wavering sands, in the tremulous shudder of the orange branches, and in the stillness of the night that foretold the intrusion of mystery and the unexpected. Feeling warm, Uriah opened the door to the balcony. The noise of the running water, as Gabriel was then having his shower, was deafened by the soft rustling of the orange leaves. Like a distant memory, it hit Uriah's understanding. He frowned, trying to recollect something. What? What was there to remember? But the fact kept coming back to him. He had seen the forest before. From a logical point of view, the thought itself was impossible as it was his first time in Palestine. Yet, everything seemed so familiar... And right when he was about to remember, his attention was distracted by a sudden apparition. The silhouette of a woman, in all the splendor and loneliness of the moment, grew visible, framed by the silver moonlight. It was then when he realised who she really was. Her face, bathed in the nocturnal light, appeared before his eyes and he saw her. The same woman he had seen crossing the London streets, that same woman who had been returning in his dream as Andromeda, that woman was now strolling at night in the orange grove. The woman was not alone. She was accompanied by a Greyhound, a big white dog with brown spots.

Uriah was so fascinated and bewildered that he even tried to wake up from a revelry he thought to be impossible.

"Have I lost my mind? She can't be here. How is

this possible?"

Nevertheless, she was there, walking in the moonlight in a beautiful white dress which appeared to be floating around her body like a halo of silk and embroidery. Her hair was loose, wavering in dark ringlets, falling over her shoulders till it reached her waist. Her pace was gentle and springy at the same time, uniting in cadence with the greyhound's own pace. Yes, it was her. Uriah knew what he had to do. He needed to convince himself of her presence. Without losing a second or two in speculations and assumptions, he left the balcony and returned inside. Gabriel was still in the shower. Uriah hastily put on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans and ran out of the room. Luckily, he was staying on the first floor or else he would have lost his breath until he got outside the hotel. And strange as it may seem, he met neither Mika nor his mother on his way out. It was as if they had vanished from the hotel. But Uriah didn't want to think about them at that moment. He needed to find her. He must find her.

He was now approaching the orange grove. Nearby, he could hear the Greyhound barking. The dog had a hoarse and strong bark.

"No, Igor", he heard her saying to the dog. "Leave the poor bird alone. It is only roosting in the tree."

Her voice...It was the same...the same voice he had heard in his dream. He approached her, and the dog gave another long bark; this time it was barking at him.

She had heard footsteps coming down the gravel, and when she turned to see who the intruder was, nothing could have prepared her for the surprise. Apparently, she remembered him from London as they had briefly met for few splitting seconds and had exchanged few glances. At

least, that was what Uriah wanted to believe.

"I am sorry, miss, for startling you." Her dark eyes were still fixed upon him. "But I think I have seen you before." He was almost losing his breath. "Are you from London?"

She was puzzled, knowing not how to answer such a direct question but then she laughed.

"No, but sure...I remember you. I never forget people's faces. They stay with me, lingering in my memory. You are right. I was in London some weeks ago, and I think I saw you standing at your window, as I was crossing the street to reach my hotel. Yes, as I have told you, I never forget a face when I see it."

"Neither do I."

The dog ceased to bark. It had smelt Uriah's trousers and hands, and deciding he meant no harm, it allowed the presence of the stranger around its mistress.

"May I join your walk?"

"If Igor doesn't consider you to be dangerous, I have nothing against. I totally trust my companion. My Igor knows how to judge people."

"Igor? Is it a Russian name?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then you are a Russian."

"Why do you assume I have to be a Russian? Don't judge a person by its name or in my case by the dog's name. No, I am not Russian, but I am of a mixed blood. My grandparents from my mother's side were from Bulgaria. They are both of them dead, they died when I was little, and I never got the chance to learn Bulgarian so don't try to test my Bulgarian language skills. Nevertheless, let's return to Igor. It was my father who chose this name. Have you read "The Song of Igor's Army"?

"Yes. I am a librarian. I have read almost every book."

She laughed again, and he blushed. It was a funny sight. He was behaving like a scholar.

"Not every book... You couldn't have read every book. Do you have any idea how many books are right now being born? We are standing here talking, and right now, maybe even at the other end of the world an idea bursts out of the bloom and a writer imagines writing a book. Other books are now being written, or printed, and so on, and you wouldn't know, because you only get to read those books that fate or circumstances provide you with. You haven't read *Păsărea Albastră*, have you?"

"What?"

"The Blue Bird", she said translating the title. "It's a Romanian book."

"Then, you are from Romania, aren't you?"

Her laughter filled again the night.

"Why are you so keen to locate me? I hate being tied to one place or another, and I hate this geographical division. We are all children of the universe, living under the same sky and treading on the same earth. Why do we have to belong to different nations and to talk different languages? We should only dwell as brothers on this earth and speak the language of the soul, the only language worth talking. But, yes, to answer your question, I was born in Romania, although I have always been a wanderer, going from one place to another, never settling down... I guess I find myself in the myth of the blue bird, the metaphor of utter freedom."

She nodded approvingly.

"Yes, like a blue bird, I only find my rest in the nest of perpetual motion."

Uriah Reed had listened fascinated, and the title

Pasărea Albastră was calling him from an unknown knoll, beckoning his mind to feast upon the strange words of a Romanian piece of literature. He needed to know the name of its author and to read more of his or her works.

“Who wrote the book?”

Her sweet laughter filled again the night with its melodious peals.

“Lalage Petrov.”

“I haven’t heard of this female writer.” He said blushing and puzzled, feeling ashamed of his ignorance.

“That would be because we haven’t been properly introduced.” She held forth her hand. “How do you do, Sir? My name is Lalage Petrov and I am pleased to meet you.”

He blinked and stammered.

“You... You wrote the book?!”

He couldn’t believe his ears.

“Yes. I am a writer. Is that a problem?”

“No, of course not...” He seized her hand, bowed and kissed her knuckles. “I am Uriah Reed, and I am a librarian.”

Her dark eyes twinkled.

“It seems that tonight the stars have decided. Far away from civilization, from Christianity, a writer meets a librarian. And for the second time, both in London and now in Palestine....As interesting as it can be.”

“That reminds me, if I may ask, what were you doing in London?” he asked her.

“I was researching for my new book.”

“What is it about?”

“About the sea, about a girl who loses her love, about myths, and about everything that my imagination is able to bring to life...Don’t question me further, I don’t

like to talk about my novels before their publication."

"I can totally understand. But *The Blue Bird*, tell me please, what is it about?"

"Have you read *Orpheus Descending* by Tennessee Williams?"

"Yes."

"Then you know that Williams talks about a blue bird that forever flies, a blue bird that even in the arms of the wind keeps flying, without resting. She flies and soars to the endless horizon, being one with the sky, and not even the accursed falcons dare to follow her in her flight. I was fascinated by the idea and I used it to show man's pursuit for utter freedom and happiness."

"It sounds interesting."

"Thank you. You should read it one day, only if to be able to say, this is a book whose author I got to know."

"I would like that," acknowledged Uriah smiling.

"Unfortunately, it hasn't been translated in English."

"I could learn Romanian. I am a quick study."

She laughed again.

"And I can teach you. I am a patient professor."

She beamed at him. "I like you, Uriah. You are a good soul. But you've been so much inquiring about me, and I so little that I am ashamed of myself. Tell me, if I am allowed to know, what's a librarian doing so far away from his library?"

"I am also researching." He again blushed.

"I hope your research proves successful."

Lalage asked no other questions. She immediately understood his need of secrecy.

"Funny", she said. "We saw each other in London. Then, I was the one who was researching. Then we meet

again so far away from the place where we first met. And now we are both researching."

Igor barked and ran ahead.

"My friend is tired", she said. "I am afraid our meeting is over for the moment."

"Where are you staying in Palestine? Let me accompany you."

"Thank you. I am staying at a little cottage near the hotel. I know the owner. It's an old man with whom my father exchanged letters on philosophical matters. You see, my father teaches philosophy, and I can also say that I love wisdom as much as my father. When my father heard that I intended to come to Palestine in order to carry on my research, he wrote to Mr. Rai and enquired if he had a spare room. That is how I ended up living next to your hotel."

"I am very glad to have met you again and to also have you for a neighbour."

"And friend", she added smiling.

"And friend."

They walked next to each other, treading firmly on the land of Palestine. The moon rose red and fiery, like a Phoenix of light, but they only noticed the shadows of their two bodies joined together by a strange fate. The dog was barking and running ahead, and they were silent, listening to each other's breath. The winds of the desert were blowing warmly, and the perfume of the orange groves was enchanting and dizzy.

When they reached her cottage, a tall shadow crept quickly inside, and Lalage frowned.

Uriah noticed the sudden change of her complexion.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "What was that?"

"It's just Mr. Rai's son, Lucien. He is a strange fellow. His father is nice, but Lucien does not resemble

him. He keeps following me, talking strangely about a valley where I need to descend." Uriah's heart beat faster, but she did not notice. "As a matter of fact", she went on, "he was the one who told me to walk through the orange grove. I didn't mean to listen to him, but the orange grove was so beautiful and inviting that even Igor ran to it. Nevertheless, I am glad I went to the grove and met you."

She smiled and he smiled back at her, but his thoughts were wandering back to Lucien. Mr. Rai's son seemed to know something about a valley; maybe the same valley he was looking for. Determined to visit Lucien the following day and discuss with him face to face, Uriah bade Lalage goodnight and kissed her hand.

"Till tomorrow", he whispered to her.

"Till tomorrow", she acknowledged.

She entered the cottage, and the door closed behind her. At one window a curtain moved, and Uriah swore he saw the outline of a man hiding behind it. For all he knew, it could have been Lucien. Throwing one last glance to the cottage, Uriah departed, followed by the glowing eye of the moon and by the glittering of the nocturnal stars.

"Till tomorrow", he whispered again, this time to the man behind the curtains.

X

Have you ever felt time slipping like sand between your fingers? Every single moment, all memories, they all fade away...Nothing ever remains. I still remember the moment I met my Self, that special moment when I became conscious of myself, of who I was and of what I was to become. But nothing prepares you for meeting the Other. He or she is just a stranger you first see and smell, and then you touch him/her. But nothing compares with a soul touch, when you open the gates of a human soul through a smile or a kind word, or simply by holding the power of penetrating the dark chambers of the unknown other through the mechanism of love.

I still remember meeting him. My Perseus, my ragged boy slave, dirty and savage... He smelt of rotten cabbage, and he was covered in mud and dust. And yet, I was fascinated by his soul. He talked to me about his mother and about endurance. He had his music and he felt as rich and powerful as my own father, the king of Ethiopia. And how I admired him...and how I loved him...That memory has become my sacred haven, my most precious moment in time, and my refuge every time I close my eyes and meet myself again.

I was wrong. There is always something that remains, something that not even time can erase, and that is the memory of one's love.

Have you ever felt the wind wrestling with your hair, unraveling each lock as if it were a mysterious scroll of a bygone age? I have. I feel the wind, billowing like a dark cape around my soul, coiling itself around my body. And I only think if he feels the wind, too.

Have you ever heard the uproar of eternity rushing to meet the fate of man? I have. I felt time passing by, like a stranger one sees for a moment before he disappears in the crowd, never to return, never to be found again. I am feeling it even now. I felt the wind, biting with its sharp teeth my flagged cheeks. The chillness of the evening is like a deadly kiss impressed upon the soul by the merciless lips of Mother Nature. All the cold evenings I have spent without him appear before my eyes in all their paleness and atrocity, benumbing my being, goading me to death. And I don't want to die...Don't they see I am so young, so full of life? Why have they decided to pour life out of me as if I were a broken vessel unworthy of holding in clear water? I want to live...I hear Keto, wailing at the shore, demanding my body and my soul. Who are they to decide that I am to be given to him? I should be the one to decide my own fate. Perhaps in another life, I will stand up for myself and face my parents. Please, my future self, remember this day, brand it in your memory and never let it happen again. Let this curse perish with me.

Keto is wailing louder and louder. I feel his hunger. And I hear eternity hissing like a serpent. It is trying to allure men towards their doom. It is trying to allure me. I hear everything as I cross the garden of orange trees. I hear the rustle of the blades, cutting in my soles. I hear the falling bodies of some shooting stars. And above all, I hear the sound of man's soul, rattling inside his mortal frame, like a ravenous snake. I am surrounded by rattling

sounds, by flickering eyeballs that creep from the grass. And the laugh...I can hear the laugh of the gods. Nothing is eternal on earth. But everything is eternal inside the soul. There are no boundaries within me, and I am one with the vastness, one with this treacherous world where loyalty and love grow like wild flowers on rocky paths and mountain summits.

Nothing can escape time, except the human soul. I know that for now. They may throw me to Keto, and still I shall rise again and tread on this earth of men, free like a bird who has at last found strong wings. Unfortunately, nothing can break the cycle of life. Nothing can escape death. Not even I who have once been a royal daughter, and now I am treading the earth in rags and fetters. Where are my beautiful garments? Why isn't my hair combed? I want to look good even in the face of death. And yet, I don't want to die. I want to live and laugh, and sing and dance, and play with time the masquerade of a woman lot. But there is no laughter left for me, and the time for singing and dancing has passed. And all because I have loved...all because I still love him...Where is he now? I don't know. I lost him in the distant past and now I cannot reach him. Oh, let the masquerade begin. Strange...masquerade...Why am I using this word I don't even know the meaning of? And yet, I know what it means...It is all very strange. It's like, in the face of death, my present self meets my past and future selves. And in this triangle of time and space, my soul receives and shares all the knowledge of the universe. How beautiful all is...and how infinitely sad...

Who am I? I try to see my reflection in the cobble stones which are spread on my way, but my eyes see only him. His face, his soul, his entire being rises from the earth

like a new sun born from the ashes of the real setting sun. And I become one with him, with the man who is now so far, and yet has never been closer. What kind of soul hides within the confinement of my mortal frame? Why does a soul have to be caged in a body? I wish I were a blue bird, forever soaring to the heights of the impossible where not even falcons dare to dart. But instead, here I am, standing in the crowd, guarded by soldiers as if I were a criminal, and not a woman in love. I am taken to my death. I am not afraid of dying. I am only afraid not to wake up in a place where I will not see his face. Where is he? Is he still alive? My eyes are searching for him among the throng of Ethiopians, lingering on every face I can find even the faintest trace of resemblance. Not even the stranger who has visited my dungeon appears in the crowd. Only the shadow he warned me about has come. It is here. I feel its coldness and hollowness.

No, I must not faint. I must be strong. What can a shadow do to me when the light of my love lives inside me, like another being which embraces the shadows of my soul up to the point that my whole body becomes an unseen sun, spreading its rays through my last night on earth. And everything reminds me of him. I am him right now. Just as he proudly stood straight as a child in the slave's market, I am standing now. Although it was another time and space, I find him again in that dear memory of our meeting. Again and again...His face floats before me.

The soldiers push me and hurl insults in my ears.

"Serpent! You've dishonoured your father."

"You're no princess! You're a whore!"

"Death to the whore!"

"Death to the serpent!"

"She is even unworthy of being fed to Keto!"

"Yes...Yes...She deserves worse."

"Death to the whore!"

"Death to the serpent!"

I try not to listen, although it is so hard not to bite and scratch while wolves are cornering you. And they call themselves "people". I spit on their humanity, and I'd rather live among the beasts rather than among my fellow creatures. Even my own family is casting me wolfish glances. My father is watching the show and says nothing. Only my mother is suppressing a sob or two, but I see no tears, no cries. Had I been mother, I would have swept the face of the earth in my rage and fury if a child of mine had been wronged or hurt. But I am alone in my battle...And I am about to die, to leave this world where others will go on living and I will cease to exist. I wonder how this world will look like without me in it. Many people will come after me and they will not remember my name. Even I begin to forget the girl I used to be. I don't remember myself. I only see him before my eyes. Is there anything that wouldn't remind me of him? I never told him what I truly felt. Foolish girl, foolish girl...You even lied yourself...But now I know. Death makes everything clearer. I see the world in its true colours, and for the first time I can hear my soul. It is already flying. The shadow cannot touch me where I am going.

I am being tied to a rock, and my soul is flying. It is flying to him, answering his call from the abyss. I hear his soul. I have always heard his soul. I have been drawn to him by a mysterious power ever since I lay my eyes on him in the slave bazaar. A spit hits my face...On turning my head, I meet Cetus's eyes. There is no mercy in them. And the cries of men unite in one anathema, against me who like them, I am too a daughter of this earth.

I close my eyes and go back...back to that moment in time where I feel safe, back to him.

I was a little girl, my father's beloved child. I remember the sun burning my skin. It was so hot, I could hardly breathe. I was riding with my father in the royal chariot, and from time to time I would secretly throw him a glance. My father, the king of Ethiopia did not seem to suffer from the excessive heat. He kept his majestic appearance even during the hardest conditions. But soon even I forgot about the heat. There were people all around me, people alive, some in rags, others in clean robes; and their faces formed an interesting gallery of unique features. There were old faces, and still, there were also young heads and eyes, but they all bore the kiss of death. They were consumed by time, and some might not have even known it. But I knew. I had seen death before, the day my grandfather died and I saw his soul leaving his body as he was drawing his final breath. I was surrounded by dead people pretending to be alive, to laugh, and some even smiled to me as the chariot drove by. I smiled back and waved my hand. I was supposed to do that; they were expecting me to do that. It was everything they knew they would get from a royalty. Tired of waiting in vain for their life to improve, they had ceased asking. They simply went on living as best as they could. Women carrying heavy baskets of fruit and vegetables were swarming to and fro. There were dirty children and crippled men who were dragging their numbed muscles before everyone else. There were so many men whose body was covered in dirt and rags, and on whose face life had painted all the misery and degradation of suffering. The human show was horrific, unbearable. I felt like covering my eyes with my hands and hiding somewhere in the dark. Overwhelmed

by all this, I tugged the sleeve of my father's robe, forcing him to notice me and hear my words.

"Why don't you command these people to be happy and clean? You have the power, father."

"I cannot command over the fate of men."

"Then, we must go to the temple and pray to the gods to alleviate the life of our subjects."

"Listen, Andromeda, the gods have better things to do than taking care of these lice."

"*A-ba*, you shouldn't talk like that. These "lice", as you call them, are your children too, and I can't stand to see my brothers and sisters suffering when we, father, have the power to help them."

"My dear *bat*, they are too many. We can't afford to look after all these beggars."

"Yes, because we spend too much on ourselves."

The king frowned, annoyed by the course of our discussion and ordered me not to say another word. I shut my mouth, although I was angry at him. After a few moments, I wanted to reprimand him again, but when I raised my eyes to his face, I realised that he wasn't looking at me, although our eyes were connected. He didn't see me for who I was. For him, I was a little girl whose mind was raw and unripe, when in fact my mind judged things in a logical manner. My father ruled the land; therefore he had both the ability and the possibility to assert welfare for each inhabitant of Ethiopia. Clearly, my father didn't see things from that angle. He didn't even bother to try to make a change. It was then when I first accused my father of being a tyrant. I had heard the word "tyrant" before, whispered in secrecy by a slave, and I knew it had to be something bad. And my father was then a tyrant. Nevertheless, I concealed my feelings and I did not give

voice to my thoughts. Right then, I saw a wooden and very long plank, a scaffold more precisely. On it, a man holding a whip was shouting loudly to some dirty and skinny people. They were all in fetters. I screamed, and my cry made its way to my father, who then noticed me. I was convulsively shaking.

“Stop the chariot”, my father cried to the driver.

The chariot stopped and my father stooped down to me, analysing my sun burnt face.

“What is the matter, Meda? Why have you cried?”

“That man,” I said pointing towards the man holding the whip, “is hurting innocent people. He must be stopped.”

“Those people belong to him. He can do what he pleases about them. They are just like our slaves from the palace.”

Still I wasn’t satisfied with this answer.

“But we don’t treat our slaves like this.”

The king said nothing, and I mistook his silence for a full agreement with my argument, whereas he did not know what to say as he also treated the royal slaves like that, something I would find out later. But then my attention was again distracted. I saw him. How savage his eyes were, and yet they were mesmerizing. Even from a considerable distance I could see their brightness, the unusual sapphire glitter, and their depth...He was only a little boy, very skinny, and dirty. Yet, there was something about him as if he were that mighty bird my father had shown me once and called it eagle when I demanded to know what it was. He was a young eagle amidst common chickens. I don’t know what had triggered my reaction, but before my father could have stopped me, I jumped from the chariot and ran to him. I passed by the slave

owner who remained with his whip raised in his hand but dared not to let it fall, fearing he might have hurt me since he realized who I was. I hardly cared about that brute. I only saw him, the young eagle. When our eyes met and our faces stood close to each other, I felt the fire of his breath and all the anger he had stored inside. I couldn't utter a word, not knowing what to say.

His long and bushy hair was half covering his face. I raised my hand to clear his face, but he gave a strange growl which stopped me half way. The slave owner rushed to hit him. It was then I first embraced him. I jumped and covered him with my body. I could hear my father shouting at me to let go of the slave, the slave owner's utter cry of stupefaction, but I only acknowledged, his gentle grip as he took my hand and pressed it with his fingers. And we talked, but mostly our souls carried on the conversation. I asked him about his mother, about his music, about himself, unaware of no one and nothing except the two of us standing together in time and space. I didn't let go of him until my father agreed to buy him. He was going to be my playmate and my companion. From that day on, he grew up at the royal palace. He was a slave, but he had always been free. He could ride like a wind and play the harp like a born musician.

I tried to be his friend, but he always pushed me aside as if he was afraid of me. Although he was cold and aloof, he kept lingering by my side. He was always there, a constant presence, like a shadow, like my own silent being. He didn't spoke too much, but he played his harp. His words were melodious and liquid, and warm, and always echoing wherever I went. He was with me always, watching over me as he pretended not to take notice of anything around him. I was playing with the other slave

girls, and he stood there motionless, like a marble statue.

Lilytha, my favourite slave friend, scorned him and laughed at him, and often she called him in jest "The Shadow". And yes, he was my shadow. He still is my shadow. I am about to die, but I feel the rush of his spirit passing along the row of rocks and stones. I feel his breath blowing like the wind as the crowd is gathering around the rock I am chained to. And I fear nothing except waking up to a reality where he is not...

Play for me, harpist...Play and laugh...I see him materializing before me, holding his harp in his arms, and soon I hear his song. He is again playing for me. He has only played for me. He never knew other songs. His lips are moving and the melodious sounds come floating out of his mouth.

"In the Valleys of Kings
Where springs run and run,
Like horses with wings
Soaring to the sun,
There is one flower
Which grows in the sky.
She is my freedom,
My rain when it's dry,
My fire when it's cold,
My beautiful Star of North."

I would listen enraptured, trying to imagine the Valleys of Kings where springs run like horses, drowning the blades in their billows of foam and fire, but most of all I tried to picture the beautiful flower so much coveted by the harpist.

"Have you ever been to the Valley of Kings?" I asked him.

"Yes, I have," he answered. "I was once there; before being a slave, my parents took me to the Valley of Kings."

"Where is it? It sounds so lovely. I wish I were there. Please, take me there."

He did not answer, infuriating me with his stubborn silence. I would get angry and I would pinch and hit him.

"I command you as the princess of Ethiopia. Lead my way to the Valley of Kings. I wish to see the mighty springs and the flower."

"I forgot the way."

This was his usual reply.

"You are lying. I know you are."

"I promise I will remember the way, and one day I will take you there, but not as a princess... You'll walk by my side as my equal."

He never took me to the Valley of Kings, but he used to draw me the place. It was lovely and not dreadful like the image I spotted in the stranger's eyes. He also made several drawings, they were weird figures. He told me he had learnt to draw them from some Egyptian scholars. I didn't like those figures, and neither could I understand the human figures of a man and a woman descending a ladder of rays. They seemed so lonely and abandoned by all mankind, but he told me I was wrong. They were not lonely as they had each other.

Our views were different, and then I did not understand his soul, as I do now. The wonderful glen, where the essence of his being was running free, was clouded in mystery. And I did not know, I failed to see the spot where the flower of his heart was growing in the nurturing soil of his love for me.

Even now, he is singing to me, as the people of Ethiopia spit in my face and mock their fallen princess. Far away, the sun is setting, and I can hear the springs gurgling in the Valley of Kings and I know he is there waiting for me.

"I am coming," I whisper, and a trail of blood splits my cheek, streaming down the crestfallen face. I feel no pain as I know that I am about to be reunited with him. "I'll be there soon, my one and only love."

The first stone had hit me in the face, the second drummed in my ear, almost deafening me. The crowd has ceased to be a crowd. It is now a monster, benumbing me, attacking hungrily for my blood. The king had ordered that I was subjected to the people's punishment before my body was thrown to Keto, the killing whale.

What have I done to deserve this? I refused to marry Phineus, the king of Israel who would have brought more wealth to Ethiopia. Yes, I was guilty for not feeding the gluttony of the social monster. Moreover, I was guilty before myself for having thought I could love a man like Cetus.

Cetus....He was the first who hurried to tie my hands and then, without even a word of comfort, he took me out of the dungeon, dragging me till here. He left without looking back. Loyal to my father, Cetus desired nothing but to show the king that a general obeys only the prerogatives of his ruler and not of his heart. He is now a distant memory, and I feel like laughing when I remember my foolish love for him. It was not real love, as real love is only met once and felt once, and there is no end to love.

Another stone falls at my feet. It was white when it had split the air, darting in my face, and now is purple. I

never thought my blood could be that purple. I imagined it red like the juice de-juiced out of a cherry. But now it is purple, dark purple, shining under the dim light of the stars high above. It is purple against the rolling waves, against my body, against the will of gods.

The waves are beating against the shore where I once rode my Pegasus. I close my eyes and the mob disappears.

Where are you, faithful horse? Do you ever think of your mistress? I still remember the night I crept into the stable. During the day, I had heard that the mare Medusa is about to give birth and I wanted to see the colt. In the stable, the horseman held the mare by the hinds, helping her to deliver. Perseus was also there, caressing the suffering mare, and mumbling low tunes in its ears.

When the colt was born, Perseus kissed the mare and ran to see the tiny and feeble creature. At a first glance, I didn't like the colt at all. It was all covered in blood, although the white of its fur was shinning dimly through the marks of labour.

"He shall be Pegasus", said Perseus to the horseman as if the white horse belonged to him. Nevertheless, he couldn't be more right. I myself knew that the colt must be named like this.

The horseman laughed, poking the boy with his elbow.

"He shall be named as the king decides. It's his horse, not yours, slave. Do not forget your station."

Perseus' fists clenched tight, but he didn't attack his superior. Silently, he began washing the young horse. His movements were slow and gentle. I could see from where I was standing unseen that he was fascinated by

that animal. I knew what I had to do. Smiling, I whispered inaudibly:

“He shall be named Pegasus.”

On the following morning, I told my father that I must have Medusa’s young stallion. It would be perfect for my riding lessons. Of course, the king didn’t object and he instantly gratified my wish.

I ran to bring Perseus the big news. By the moment I reached him, I was almost without breath. Like usually, he was standing alone by the stable’s fence, looking wistfully at the white stallion.

“Guess what,” I shouted excited in his ears, startling him to the bone. “The stallion belongs to me. My father has just agreed to let me have it.”

He shrugged his shoulders and didn’t say anything.

“You can also ride it,” I continued with glee. “How would you like him to be called?”

I pretended not to have heard him last night because I did not wish to hurt his feelings.

“It’s up to you to decide”, he briefly and hastily answered when he decided at last to speak.

I was baffled and abated by his reaction. I could not believe my ears. How could he pretend to be so indifferent?

“I will name him Pegasus, like it or not.”

I shouted in his years and I was glad to see him reacting. All the colours had gone out of his cheeks, and if it hadn’t been for a tinge of red that spread over his neck, I would have guessed he had run out of blood. Yet, he kept silent.

“Do you like the name Pegasus?” I asked him again.

I had disclosed the name he had given to Medusa's colt, and still he did not even blink. I was furious. I am furious even now for not having understood him.

"I will name the crowd Cetus," I uttered feebly under the shower of stones.

I felt I was losing consciousness, but before I closed my eyes I saw the shadow that had appeared before Lilytha bearing her the news about my love for Perseus. He was standing there in the crowd with a wide grin upon his face. He was ugly...ugly like a pestilential quagmire, spread across the split belly of a putrid earth. And his grin...I hated his grin.

You shall not win.

He flinched as if he had understood my thoughts and yet he remained there.

You shall not have this Andromeda.

His grin seemed to fade a little.

You shall not stain the love I have for Perseus.

The shadow stuttered, resembling a hunchback hit by a giant's club.

I choose to stay alive, despite death and time. I choose my soul. I choose Life. I choose Perseus.

A piercing cry split the night, and Keto's wails echoed the dissipation of the shadow into the darkness of the night.

I was no longer tied to a rock. I was heading myself towards the water. When the cold waves touched my feet, I stopped at the shores of time. Suddenly, Pegasus appears by my side, ready to dive with me, assuring me that he will never abandon me. I plunged myself into the waves, and fell deep. I closed my eyes and soon I fell into a strange but pleasant dream. What else but a dream could

that be? I felt two arms embracing me, the same two arms that once brought harps to life, and I felt a body sheltering me under the wall of its flesh.

"Perseus...I....I have....to tell you something.
I've...a...l...ways loved you!"

"I know. I have always known it."

And then everything went blank before my eyes,
and I fell alone in the cold waves of a long and numb
slumber.

XI

When Lalage woke up, the clock was showing thirteen minutes to twelve p.m. She was woken from her sleep by the strangest dream she had ever had. Right after getting back to her cottage, after meeting Mr. Uriah Reed, Lalage had gone straight to bed, and hardly had she been sleeping for an hour, when her sleep was disturbed. Nevertheless, the dream she had had seemed to grow in dimension and meaning, threatening to crush the fragile peace which Lalage had sought for so long.

"Come on, Lalee", she tried to reassure herself, "it was only a dream."

She knew she was lying herself. Her dream Perseus looked exactly like Uriah Reed. Could it be possible that unconsciously, she was beginning to have feelings for him? But that was nonsense. She barely knew him, and still, there she was, in a Palestinian cottage, fantasizing about a British librarian, she had recently met and who was nothing like the mythological hero of the Greek pantheon. Moreover, Uriah had appeared in her dream in the guise of a slave, unlike the original myth.

Too much thinking...I am getting a headache.

Lalage yawned and stretched.

Yes, it is better to focus upon the present and not upon mere trifles.

Thus, willing herself to have a good mood and enjoy her day, she put imagination aside and chose the

tangible canvas of reality. And indeed she started to feel better. She got off the bed, slipped her feet into some cozy slippers, and went to the bathroom. After a quick shower, the world seemed a better place. And it truly was. Outside it was a bright day. Although it was the end of November, the weather was mild and serene. And Lalage was confident that she would meet Uriah Reed during the day.

Uriah Reed...Lalage smiled, and everything came back, like a memory triggered by the laws of incidental associations. If only he knew she had dreamt him last night, and what a dream that was. He was Perseus, the mythological hero, well, in her case it was Perseus, the slave, but nevertheless, one couldn't deny that last night's imagery had been peculiar and intriguing.

Perhaps, I will tell him about my dream. He'll sure make fun of it, but anyway, I am curious to hear his opinions about it.

And that were her thoughts as she headed for the kitchen. But when she entered the kitchen, Lalage realized that someone else had arrived there before her, and now was sitting at the table with a cup of hot cocoa in front of him. He not even bothered to look at her.

"Good morning, Lucien!" Lalage politely greeted him.

The young man merely grunted and kept on sipping his cocoa. His hair was unkempt and his face unwashed, but he didn't seem to mind at all.

I wonder if he's even conscious of having a body which he should keep clean.

"Where is Mr. Rai?" Lalage asked him.

"Gone to fetch some cattle."

"I see... Do you have any idea what time he will be back?"

"He won't be back till night fall."

Lalage frowned. She had counted on Mr. Rai to drive her to the village. He had promised to take her to see the Gate of Jaffa.

"He told me to take you there, you know, if you still wanna go."

Only the idea of accepting Lucien's offer was enough to make her stomach clench. But she couldn't tell him that. However, he seemed to guess what thoughts were now crossing her mind. He pouted and almost threw her a heated glance, as if he utterly hated her.

"I'll let you know, okay?"

Lalage tried to sound cheerful, but failed to conceal her true feelings. Fortunately, Lucien sank back into his usual grumpy mood, and Lalage didn't reopen the subject. She surreptitiously glanced at him, and the more she contemplated his features, the more he resembled the dark shadow of her dream, more reason for Lalage to decide not to apply to Lucien for showing her around.

She went to the fridge, opened it, and took out some food. She would have for breakfast salmon paté on Graham bread, dark chocolate, almonds, and a glass of milk.

"Would you like some?" she asked Lucien.

"I've already had breakfast."

Lucien paused for a minute, scrutinizing Lalage from under his bushy eyebrows. She felt awkward. Ever since she got here, she had felt awkward around him.

"I saw you with him last night."

Lalage almost chocked with a piece of bread. She violently coughed.

"I beg you pardon?"

"You heard me well."

"Are you spying on me?" She sounded furious.

"I am just worried what my neighbours would say about the decent family of Rai, lodging a woman who flings her charms before strangers."

Lalage hardly mastered all her strength not to jump at him and smart his stupid face.

"What is your problem, Lucien?"

"You", he simply said.

"For your information, Mr. Uriah Reed is an honourable man with whom I have been acquainted in London." She was half lying. She had indeed seen him in London. Well, what matters if he happened to be looking out the window as she was passing by, they did see each other. "And", she loudly yelled to him; "what I am doing in my own private time, with my personal life, is strictly and categorically, my own damn problem."

"Not as long as you're staying in my father's house."

"I'll move then." She said, rising from the table.

He barred his way.

"I am sorry, Miss Lalage. I didn't mean to offend you. I just gave you a friendly advice."

Even his excuse lacked truth or any genuine feeling. It had forcefully come out, although Lucien was not actually sorry for saying those words.

Lalage didn't respond. She left the kitchen, went in her room and dressed for going out. She had to find Uriah Reed and ask him whether he knows if there is an extra room at Mika's hotel. She would pack her things later, perhaps, tomorrow, after Mr. Rai's return from the village.

When she descended, at the bottom of the stairs, Lucien had been waiting for her.

"Where are you going?"

"Far away from the respectable house of Rai", she ironically replied, and without waiting for Lucien's further comments, she left the house, slapping the door behind her.

Soon Thalmuses Hotel appeared before Lalage, looking like an ancient temple that surrounded by an orange grove, was awaiting the arrival of prophets and prophetesses to burn the incense of faith and sing the hymns of redemption. At the entrance, Mika's mother was dozing off on her bench. Nevertheless, when Lalage approached, like an old Cerberus, the woman opened her eyes and sniffed the air. Adjusting her spectacles, the old woman scrutinized the youth who like a ghost, had appeared before her.

"Good morning, granny", Lalage said smilingly, but the woman didn't smile.

Gravely, she nodded, and closed her eyes again. Lalage remained where she was, fascinated by the matriarchal face of the old woman, and only when Mika Bernstein's voice woke her up from her revelry, did she realize that she had come here to search for Uriah Reed.

"Good morning, young lady", Mika greeted her. "Please, don't mind my mother. She's old and a little deaf. What can I do for you?"

For a moment, Lalage wanted to ask him personally if there was still a room available at Thalmuses, but instead she asked him about Uriah.

"Oh, my British guests have just woken up and are having breakfast. Please, come in, I will take you to them."

"No, I'll wait here till they finish. But, please, I will appreciate if you'll let Uriah know that I am waiting outside to talk to him."

Mika agreed, and Lalage went near the old lady, sitting on the same bench. Mrs. Bernstein didn't open her eyes. But even though her eyelids had hid the light of the eyes from Lalage's view, the latter felt the vigilance of the old woman's soul.

Inside the dining room, Uriah and Gabriel were the only ones having breakfast at that time. The other tourists hadn't woken up yet.

"What are you planning to do next?" Gabriel asked Uriah.

"I have to search what is cloaked from the senses."
"Elohim?"

"Yes, I have to search Jehovah Elohim."

"Uriah," Gabriel's face had grown serious. "Do you really think you can find God? What if He doesn't want to be found?"

"No, God always appears to the one who needs His guidance. And this is my quest. Besides, even Jesus said that 'if you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. But if you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you,'" said Uriah, quoting from the Gospel of Thomas.

"And what do you think that is exactly within you, Uriah?"

"The desire of saving mankind..."

On hearing his friend's words, Gabriel couldn't refrain from smiling.

"Desire...Curious, but it has just came into my mind some lines from Hinduism. It could be the Veda system of wisdom. I don't quite remember, but nevertheless, Hindu religion believes that 'desire caused all the Gods to fall from their places...and it is desire that leads all creatures to hell.'"

"I am not going to hell," Uriah said after listening attentively to Gabriel.

"Then where are you going, my friend? Quo Vadis, Uriah?"

Never had Uriah felt more tired, at a loss of finding the right words to make Gabriel understand the tremendous fascination of deciphering the mysteries of creation.

"I do not know what path I will finally choose", Uriah finally confessed, "but I do know that the chosen path will lead me to God, i.e. to my union with God. Even the word 'religion', Gabriel, comes from the Latin word 'religare' which means union. I know I have to unite with God in order to deliver mankind from falling prey to evil."

"Well, I don't know about that, Uriah, but..."

Right then, Mika entered announcing Uriah that a charming lady awaits for him outside. Gabriel who knew nothing about Uriah's mysterious encounter threw his friend a confused glance.

"I will explain it later", Uriah excused himself, "but now I have to go."

He rose from the table and left, leaving behind a very flabbergasted Gabriel Archer. When Uriah stepped into the yard, Lalage rose from the bench and walked to him. She looked wonderful; Uriah found himself thinking as he admired her silhouette gliding along the blades of grass.

"Good morning, Mr. Reed", Lalage said as soon as they were standing face to face."Forgive me for such an early social call, but I need to speak with you urgently."

"Good morning, Miss Lalage. I am very glad you've come to me. Would you like to come in and discuss the matter inside or do you prefer walking around?"

"Let's take a walk, if you don't mind."

"Not at all", he reassured her. "Has something happened?"

"I had an unpleasant row with Mr. Rai's son, the guy I talked to you about last night, and I am afraid I can no longer remain there for the rest of my staying in Palestine."

"I am so sorry to hear that. What caused this row?"

Lalage took a deep breath and then, let the truth out.

"You."

Uriah looked at her in awe.

"Me? How is this possible?"

"Last night, Lucien saw us together, and this morning, he confessed his worries concerning the reputation of his family if they allowed a woman who indulges in secret conversations with men, to remain under their roof."

"Oh, my goodness", moaned Uriah. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I'll go immediately and explain the situation to Lucien."

Lalage beamed at him.

"You don't have to. I have already explained the situation to him. He should mind his own business. Mr. Reed, I didn't come to you, like a damsel in distress. I came to you to ask whether Thalmuses is a good place to stay at, and if there is a room available."

"Yes, I believe there is. But, I still think I should talk to Lucien."

"No, you shouldn't. I don't care what he thinks. I will return to the Rai's and after talking and explaining the situation to Mr. Rai, I will leave their house, but no sooner. I owe Mr. Rai an explanation. He is my father's

pen friend and I don't want to ruin their friendship only because Mr. Rai's son is a disagreeable, nosy person. And after, paying Mr. Rai my rent, I'll come to Thalmuses. Unfortunately, I will have to wait till morning since Mr. Rai won't return home sooner."

They had approached a sandstone hill.

"Let's stop for a second", suggested Lalage, and sat on the grass, sheltered by the leafy branches of a fig. Uriah also seated next to Lalage. She carefully looked at him.

"What?" Uriah asked, feeling a tinge of red in his cheeks.

"Nothing", smiled Lalage. "I only remembered the dream I had last night."

Suddenly, Uriah stopped breathing, waiting restlessly for her words.

"I dreamt you."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Uriah spoke.

"So have I."

Lalage laughed.

"Why are you laughing? I did dream about you."

"What was the dream about?" asked Lalage, still giggling.

"You tell me first what yours was about."

"Fine", Lalage agreed, still smiling. "I dreamt that I was the princess of Jaffa and you were my slave."

All the blood curdled in Uriah's veins, and a mortifying paleness spread across his face.

"Are you okay, Uriah?" Lalage asked him with a worried look upon her face.

He didn't reply, but gazed at her as if she were an artifact, containing tremendous secrets and dangerous

knowledge. And when he found his words again, he voiced his soul, letting out a long confession. Standing in the shadow of the fig tree, Lalage listened to the stories of Uriah's nights, and when he finished, she was the one who now looked petrified and numb.

"I don't understand", she murmured, clinging to him, like he was a sort of key to the chamber of reason and logic.

"I don't understand either."

She looked at him in disbelief.

"Why are you here in Jaffa?"

"I can't tell you."

"You don't trust me, do you?"

"I do trust you."

"But...?"

"But I cannot ask you to share the burden of my quest."

"What if I want to?"

"I will not allow it."

Lalage wanted to say something, to rebuke him, but right then, as if the heavens above had woken from the heavy slumber of life, a thunder split the silence of the clearing, and drops of rain started falling from the dark running clouds.

"We are too far from Thalmuses", Lalage shouted at him. "We need to take shelter from the rain."

"Yes, we can't remain under this fig. It might be struck by lightning. But where should we go?"

"I know a place one mile away from here. We'll have to run fast to get there in time before the storm gets loose."

And they ran and ran, through the veils of the falling rain, until they reached a small one storey reed

hut, situated near a marshy area and on a coast, 5 miles of the village.

"Who lives here?" asked Uriah intrigued by the desolation of the place.

"Father Mathias. He is a good man."

Saying this, Lalage approached the door of the hut and knocked. For a moment, there was no answer, and Uriah thought that nobody was at home, but then a voice answered the knock, inviting them to open the door and usher themselves in. And they did follow the instruction; thus entering a small and simple hut that only had a bed, a stove, and a table with one chair.

"Bo-ker⁶, my children", he greeted them, and Lalage answered, while Uriah simply stared at the blind man who mildly smiled at his two visitors.

Father Mathias was a curious man of over 50 years of age, dress in a gray plated cloak that reached his ankles. His white hair was long and falling in a foamy waterfall of locks, and his olive skin stretched endlessly over the bones that didn't seem covered in flesh but in a leathery garment, resembling a scroll where the history of a man's life appeared depicted in symbols and representations of a mysterious nature.

"Come in", he urged them. "I am so sorry I do not have enough chairs to make you feel comfortable but I seldom have visitors. There is hardly a soul that remembers me."

"It's okay, father", Lalage tried to comfort him. "We'll just sit on the floor."

Both Lalage and Uriah adopted the Arabic position of bending their knees and sitting on the ground, while Father Mathias sat on his only chair.

6 Morning (hebrew)

"My father, Professor Petrov sends you his best wishes. He fondly recalls the short time he spent in your company when you were preaching in Rome."

"Yes, that was a long time ago. I remember your father. He was a good man."

Right then, a thunder split the skies, making the earth quiver in the secular silence of its motionless. The white hollows of Father Mathias's eyes pierced the walls of the hut as if trying to reach the scenery of the distant rainy landscape.

"Weather can be tricky in November. It rains a lot during this month in Palestine."

"Indeed."

"What is your name, my child? And who is the man who accompanies you?"

Uriah was startled. Although, he hadn't uttered a word since they came in, Father Mathias knew he was a man and not a lady friend.

"My name is Lalage Petrov, and this is my friend, Mr. Uriah Reed."

"Nice to meet you", said Father Mathias and smiled again.

"Nice to meet you", they both replied.

"What are you doing here in Palestine?"

"I am writing a book", Lalage confessed.

"What kind of book?"

"It's about myths and ancient civilization."

Then something strange happened. If Lalage had been reluctant to discuss with Uriah the topic of her book, she told Father Mathias all the details.

"The action takes place in Mesopotamia, the land of rivers. I have chosen this area because it is considered to have been the cradle of civilization. And in this place, a Sumerian warrior is born. His name is Sinh, and he is

also known as the lion of the desert. One day, he meets a beautiful princess, who had come to bathe in the waters of the river Pison. They fall madly in love, but he is killed by a Babylonian ruler who wanted the girl for himself."

"It sounds sad."

"All love stories are sad."

"Not all. Only the best ones", said Father Mathias with another candid smile.

"What about you?" His gaze was now turned to Uriah. "What brings you here?"

"I cannot tell."

"If you cannot tell, how can you find what you are looking for?"

"How do you know I am looking for something?" asked Uriah puzzled.

"Aren't we all looking for something? The life of man is an endless quest for meaning and answers."

"I am looking for a sacred place."

"Every place is sacred if you allow God to settle within your heart. Thus, God shall be with you wherever you go."

"No, the place I am searching is called the Valley of the Kings."

Father Mathias' hands trembled for a minute; then stretching out his arm, he fumbled in the darkness for Uriah. The latter got nearer to the blind man, and let his shoulders rest under the callous hands of Father Mathias.

"My son, you are searching in the wrong place."

"No", cried Uriah and Lalage looked at both of them in awe, not understanding what was happening. "No, I am the last descendant of The Wooden Cross Order. I have read the manuscript, I have decoded the symbols. It all leads here."

Father Mathias shook his head.

"It all leads to man. Man has created symbols and codes in order to substitute the intangibility of God. You see, my son, we are imperfect beings and we crave for a fulfillment of all the five senses. We need to see, hear, smell, feel, and acknowledge the divinity. And that is why, religion has created icons and statues, and codes, and even orders, so that God may be represented in the world of mankind."

"Do you mean to say that the Garden of Eden has never existed? Or that the Bible has misinterpreted things?"

"My son, of course the Garden of Eden has existed, and is still exists. But it's not a place; it's a feeling of utter harmony and peace that originates within all of us. The same applies to Hell. That is to say we are our own light and chiaroscuro. And the Bible is just a story told by each nation, under different forms, but bearing the same message; and that is that God is the All Mighty Creator, the Loving Father who may punish and redeem, but who nevertheless drives all the mortals on the right path of their journey towards divinity."

"But according to the manuscript of the Wooden Cross Order, God has placed a part of His soul into a vessel that is prone to self destroy in time."

Lalage shuddered, unable to fully assess the tremendous fascination of that peculiar moment.

"Don't you see, my son", Father Mathias went on, "the vessel is the world and it always self destroys in order to regenerate and grow stronger. We need to experience death, so that we may reborn as a better nation of men."

Uriah looked at Father Mathias with disbelief. He was experiencing the same sensation of the cave dweller described by Plato who had just been told that outside

the cave, lies a world he is not acquainted with. And then he thought about the peculiar dreams, both he and Lalage had had, and searching for her gaze, he read in her dark pupils the unfathomable horror of the truth that fought its way up to the surface. And he began telling Father Mathias about their common dreams, describing the sensations, the feelings, and their shared fate, as well as their strange meeting both in London and in Palestine. And Father Mathias listened, and absorbed the outpour of information, as outside, the earth let itself imbued by the shower of the autumn rain.

When Uriah finished his confession, Father Mathias gave his usual kind smile.

“Dreams, my children, are the matrix of recurrent patterns and mysterious interstices, and sometimes, they provide access to the universal consciousness of all humanity. And if you two met, that is not strange either. Nothing ever disappears from the surface of the earth. Everything comes back under a shape or another.”

“Are you talking about reincarnation?”

“Yes. And if you two dream about Andromeda and Perseus, that doesn’t mean you were indeed Andromeda and Perseus. This myth exists in many cultures, under different forms. For instance, in the story of Saint George who met a beautiful woman, in the land of Africa, and the woman had been tied beside a lake inhabited by a dragon. But Saint George was not the only one who fought dragons. In the Northern sagas, one can find the legendary Beowulf. And in the Japanese mythology we find the representation of Perseus in the god of thunder, Susanoo, who saves the princess Kushinada Hime from the serpent Yamato no Orochi.”

“But then why did we have these dreams?”

"Because in one of your past lives you lived something similar with the story depicted by the myth, but since the soul's memory cannot look back as if it would examine a picture, the mind begins to make associations and to represent past memories through symbols found in your present culture and civilization."

Uriah and Lalage felt submerged into the waters of a great deluge. It was the primordial deluge of the awakening.

"If you want I can make you go back and remember," Father Mathias said.

"What do you mean? When you say go back, are you referring to hypnosis?"

Father Mathias nodded.

"I don't know about this", Lalage faltered, and made an attempt to rise from the ground, but Uriah stopped her.

"I want to do it", he said.

"What?" Lalage cried in shocked. "Are you mental?"

"Hey, you are the one who brought me here in the first place."

"Yah, to shelter ourselves from the rain...And I guess the sky has cleared itself. We should leave, Uriah."

"I am not leaving. I want this."

Lalage knew the battle had been lost.

"I hope you know what you are doing."

"Don't you worry, bat." He'll be fine."

"Lie down", Father Mathias told Uriah, and he lay down.

Father Mathias began talking. He had a deep, hissing voice, soft and mysterious at the same time. He asked Uriah to imagine that he was in an empty meadow.

There was a path ahead of him, and Uriah was supposed to follow that road and see where it led to. With every step he took, Uriah Reed felt the fresh, cool air of the mountains. High above, the piercing cries of the eagles floated like an airy veil of sounds. And Uriah kept walking and walking, and with each step, he fell deeper and deeper into his subconscious.

Soon, he reached a huge gate which had strange letters and drawings on it. After he opened the gate, and went through it, he felt cold. Underneath his feet, spread a dazzling silvery carpet of snow. He was home. He had reached home. Uriah Reed had never felt safer, and more overwhelmed by everything he saw. He was like an exiled man who after a long absence, was now returning to his beloved country.

He saw his parents' house, his five brothers. He talked with them, laughed with them. Then he was at school, forever playing pranks, and hiding in a corner, far away from the classes and the teacher, with James Fennimore Copper's *The Last of the Mohicans* in his lap. It was then, after reading that marvelous book, when he first thought of going to America, to that fascinating geography of the Native Americans. But then he grew up, he fell in love, he suffered. He even thought of taking his life. And in the darkest period of his life when he had abandoned all hopes, he met her, his Aleksandra, the guiding light and inspiration of his life. Her parents were planning to marry her with a rich General. They kept bragging about her beauty and about the General's fortune. But the young and inexperienced Aleksandra did not love the General. She had fallen in love with the poor student who aspired to become a man of letters. How he had fought for her, fiercely, like a lion, and he succeeded

to save her from a mismatched alliance.

Later he became a writer, and married the woman of his dreams. How happy did they live in their dainty house. He loved her with a god like passion, and with an equal fury he mourned over her dead body, when she fell ill and died. It was then, during her illness that she began to hallucinate. She claimed that she was running through a forest, all dressed in white, and that her name was Andromeda. And he called her, Andromeda, each time he leaned over her sweaty forehead, pressing his lips upon the pale skin. And she described to him the happiness she experienced when he was near. But the moment of her death was agonizing. She knew she was about to die, and she told him that she wouldn't let death have her. She described her journey towards the sea where she meant to plunge in the waves. And when she reached the waves, she cried in despair. The waves were so cold against her feverish skin.

He took her hand and said that he would never leave her alone. And they dived in together, she in death, and he in despair. The same night, he passed a bullet through his heart.

The moment, the gun had fired, Uriah woke up to reality. He felt disoriented, confused. He got up from where he was standing. A heavy dizziness numbed his limbs, and how cold was him...He shivered, and Lalage rose frightened to steady him, as he stuttered on his feet. He was experiencing the acute sense of fatigue that one had after travelling for miles and miles. And the cold was unbearable, like a sharp blade, as if he had been to the North Pole and back.

There was also a sharp pain in his nape as if he had hit something hard. Perhaps, the pain had been caused by

his uncomfortable sleeping position. He felt scared and his heart was drumming loudly in his chest.

"What has happened to you, Uriah?" Lalage desperately cried.

He turned his face to her, and his eyes almost filled with tears. It felt so nice to see her again, to touch her hands, and breathe the odour of her skin.

"It was a strange experience, wasn't it?" Father Mathias chuckled.

"Let's get out of here, Uriah", Lalage implored. "It was a bad idea coming here."

"I am fine, Lalage", he assured her when he managed at last to calm himself. He had almost called her Aleksandra, but he knew she wouldn't understand.

"Thank you, Father Mathias".

"You're welcome, my son, and remember that there's more to this life than meets the eye."

"Let's go, Uriah", Lalage urged.

"Yes, go my children. The rain has stopped."

Before they left the hut, Lalage turned to Father Mathias as the latter called her to give one last warning.

"Stay away from Lucien Rai. Be hats la kha⁷ and bless it be, my children."

Once they were out, Lalage panted huffily.

"He knew I am staying with the Rai. How did he know that? And why did he warn us about him?"

Uriah had no answer.

"And you...you gave me such a fright. What happened during your hypnosis?"

"Nothing", he lied.

"I don't believe you."

"It is true. I just fell into a deep slumber, and I don't remember anything I saw while I was sleeping."

7 Good luck (hebrew)

She still seemed incredulous, but accepted his variant of truth. He hadn't told her that he had indeed travelled far, far away into the distant past of another time and space. His past life where he had felt the power of love and the power of bereavement... And now he knows that his soul won't find peace until he finds that Valley of the Kings. Although, Father Mathias told him it is not a physical place, Uriah felt it had to emerge out of something. It has to have a concrete existence, and there he will bury his manuscript and his past, after which he will try to start a new life.

**

Lalage had returned to the Rai's cottage. Mr. Rai, Lucien's father had still not arrived home from the village.

"Something must have happened", Lucien informed her. "It has often happened to see my father return home after two or three days."

Lalage helplessly sighed, and deciding to put up with the situation, she went to bed. She felt tired and she really needed a good night's rest. Tomorrow, she will definitely see things in a clear perspective.

The following day, Lalage again found Lucien alone in the kitchen. His father still hadn't returned.

"No news from Mr. Rai yet?" she asked, faintly hoping for a positive answer.

"No."

And suddenly, she felt sadder, and her thoughts drifted away at the previous day's recollections. It had been a strange stream of events. And what a character was that Father Mathias...He would make an excellent Mesopotamian prophet or priest, or maybe a scribe. She

would think about it, but without doubt, Father Mathias was to enter in the pantheon of her fictitious characters.

"You won last time, but not anymore."

Lucien's malicious voice woke her up from her revelry. Lalage was getting more and more confused. She looked at Lucien and his eyes showed no pity. They had almost disappeared behind the darkness of the piercing pupils. Those were no human eyes. They couldn't be human eyes.

"I am afraid I do not understand you, Lucien. What have I won, if you are kind enough to explain to me?"

He grinned. It was the same grin that the shadow in her dream had. The more she thought about it, the more Mr. Rai's son looked like the stranger that had come in the dream to witness her death. And Father Mathias had warned her about him.

"I do not understand you, Lucien."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and Lucien smacked mockingly his lips.

"Hurry up and open, your paramour has arrived."

"I don't have any paramour, and by the way, you should mind your own business." Lalage rebuked him, and went to open the door.

It was indeed Uriah Reed.

"Good morning, Mr. Reed."

"Good morning, Miss Petrov."

And without knowing exactly why, Lalage blushed.

"I am so sorry for disturbing you at such an early morning", Uriah began to apologize himself, "but I need to speak with Mr. Rai's son, if he is at home."

"You want to talk with Lucien?"

"Yes, he wants to talk with me."

Lucien had appeared behind Lalage, smiling slyly at Uriah Reed who felt a chill down his spine.

“Miss Petrov, I will explain everything as soon as I finish with Mr. Lucien.”

“No, you don’t have to, Mr. Reed. Please, do come in. I will make a cocoa for you and serve it in the living room.”

“As a matter of fact, Miss Lalage, I was hoping Mr. Lucien will accompany me on a walk down the fields. His familiarity with the Palestinian landscape will serve me well.”

“Don’t the British know how to say please?”

Uriah gave Lucien an impatient look, but decided that it would be best not to upset the only hope he had for getting a clue on what he was looking for.

“Please, Mr. Lucien, I will be more than grateful if you could grant me this service.”

“That’s more like it now.”

Putting a cardigan on, Lucien left the house and followed Uriah, leaving behind a bewildered Lalage.

“I’ll come back soon, Miss Lalage, and when I do I will appreciate if you allow me a few words.”

“Take your time, Mr. Reed.”

Lalage watched the two men disappearing outside the door that closed behind them. They walked at first in silence, each studying the other. Uriah had decided that Lucien was not a trustworthy person, and Lucien’s mind was as impenetrable as a solid wall of iron.

“I understood from Lalage”, Uriah broke the ice, “that you know something about a valley.”

“I know many valleys.”

“But you only referred to one valley in particular.”

"I may have...I may have not...Why should that interest you?"

Taking a deep breath, Uriah fumbled for the right words.

"I need to find a valley or a place, a garden more precisely."

Lucien stopped and looked gravely at Uriah.

"Why have you come to me?"

"You told Lalage that she needs to descend into one particular valley."

"Listen, Mr. Reed, I only gave her a friendly suggestion. After all she is a tourist and she should enjoy all the beauties that Palestine has to offer."

The tension had accumulated in the air, waiting to break loose all the havoc of a battle that kept repeating in time and space.

"Mr. Lucien, I would be very grateful if you helped me find a very old and sacred location, perhaps known as The Valley of the Kings."

The dark pupils of Lucien Rai had become even darker, and Uriah Reed had the impression that underneath that human mask, something terrible hides, terrible and unutterable.

"There is no such thing as the Valley of the Kings."

I have heard that before...Please, tell me something new.

"You are lying, Lucien."

"There is no such thing as the Valley of the Kings because in the past it was known as the Aleph, that is ..."

"The beginning", completed Uriah Reed.

"Yes, the beginning."

"But why it was known as the Valley of the Kings?"

Lucien smiled.

"Many centuries ago, the slaves of Jaffa, after their death, were thrown into a valley and left to rot or serve as carrion for the eagles and hawks that hovered over the region. But the poor wretched souls began to invent stories that would ease their burdens. Ironically, isn't it? Regardless of this ludicrous situation, the slaves crowned themselves kings. They would tell their children and grandchildren about a magnificent valley where they would go after death and become kings. Soon, there was no slave in Jaffa who wouldn't talk, sing, or crave after the Valley of the Kings."

Uriah Reed couldn't believe what he had just heard. Lucien was lying. He must be lying.

"I see you don't believe me, but why is that so hard to believe that sometimes the beautiful chimera a man chases all his life turns out to be just smoke and ashes?"

"Then, it has to be another valley. I need to find a pristine space, untouched by civilization or man."

Lucien laughed heartily.

"You are really funny, British. There is no place that hasn't been humanly polluted."

He knew he had to attack the topic directly and without hesitation.

"What do you know about Eden, Lucien?"

Lucien seemed to hesitate, as if he was calculating his next movement. Nevertheless, it was only a false impression. Uriah thought he saw a faint trace of longing falling in the light of the dawn on Lucien's face. When he answered, his voice betrayed no emotion, no feeling. It was empty, as if coming from a void.

"A lot more than you might think."

"Have you heard about the Garden of Eden? Do you think it might be located here, in Palestine?"

"Why do you want to find it?"

"To save mankind, Lucien...to save you."

For a moment, Lucien analysed Uriah Reed, and then, smiled. It was a different smile. There was no trace of mockery or pride. The smile had cast light upon the unfathomable depth of a struggling soul.

"Why do you want to save mankind, Uriah? Is it worth it?"

"Always."

"You are either mistaken, my friend, or you simply forget how vicious and cruel human nature can be."

"But it is also capable of great deeds and acts of courage and love."

"Still, evil prevails over everything you've mentioned."

"No, evil has only the illusion of triumph. It can't win, not as long as there is faith, hope, and love."

Lucien's fists trembled. His crimson lips had gone purple, and the hollows of his eyes gazed menacingly to Uriah.

"What can faith do when a son mourns over his dead father's body, and God won't bring him back? What can hope do when a man longs to return in his country and end his exile, although he has been forbidden to come back home as long as he lives? What can love do when the object of your utmost adoration pushes you into the pit of loneliness and disillusionment?"

He had talked so fiercely, so heatedly, that in that moment, Uriah really pitied him.

"You must have suffered a lot."

"What do you know about suffering? You know nothing."

"I can save you."

"I don't need salvation. Save yourself, Uriah Reed. You say you need to find the Garden of Eden, there it is in the orchard next to the hotel you are staying in."

"What? It can't be..."

"Right under your very nose, isn't it?"

"But how can you tell for certain?"

"That orange grove is the Aleph, or the Valley of the Kings."

"And that is the Garden of Eden?"

"No, that is the starting point of your quest."

"I don't understand."

"Do you wish to understand?"

Why do all Palestinians speak in riddles?

Uriah felt more and more frightened and exasperated.

"Who are you?"

"I guess you already know."

Lucien approached Uriah who startled took one step back. It was useless to fight against the irresistible desire of looking into those dark eyes which seemed to hold all the secrets of the universe. Pinned to the ground, Uriah found out that he can no longer move his limbs. He had nowhere to escape. When Lucien's cold lips touched his brow, Uriah's body shook with impotent fury and sadness.

"The devil always kisses the brow of those marked by fate, Uriah."

When Uriah opened his eyes, the sun had risen high above the earth, leaving a copper hue across the frame of the horizon. Uriah was alone, and alone he headed to his hotel, bearing the burden of a cursed kiss.

Father Mathias was right. The real Eden is inside a man's mind. The entire human body is a road map to God. The

tree of knowledge resides in the soil of logic and reason, and the tree of life originates in the soul. But evil knows nothing about this. It only knows the hell that roars and scourges all hopes. I know now. For each human being, Eden starts in the point where the Tree of Life meets with the Tree of Knowledge. For me it is the orange grove located in Palestine, where I met Lalage Petrov, my Andromeda from another life, my Aleksandra. And now I know how to find the vessel of God on earth. That is why Lucien showed me the truth. He cannot touch the vessel himself and he needs me to do it. But I have the upper advantage. Lucien has never known the nature of God's vessel. He has never touched it or received it within. The vessel is within us, it is the love we have for the other and for the entire universe. I made a mistake in the past. I should have never destroyed my corporeal frame. I should have kept faith, hope, and love alive. Love is the salvation of mankind; love and the power to endure, to believe in the God of your forefathers, and to hope beyond hope. I must talk to Lalage at once and take her away from here. No, it would be even better if we didn't meet at all. At least, not until I cleaned my soul from the shadow of my past mistakes... Nevertheless, she has to get out of this country and save herself.

XII

"Where have you been?" asked Gabriel the moment Uriah entered the room.

Uriah could see that Gabriel was furious. The latter had been waiting for Uriah all day, without a clue of where he might be. He had worried, he had fidgeted, and imagined the worst, and now there he was safe and sound. Gabriel felt like punching him hard.

"You left me alone at breakfast and vanished without an explanation."

"I didn't have time to explain it to you."

Uriah seated himself on the bed. He was exhausted. He fished from his pockets a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"It has been a long day, Gabriel."

"Indeed."

"I am so sorry if I hurt your feelings. It was not my intention, but I didn't have time to fill you in. I had to go and meet her."

"Meet who? Who was she, Uriah?"

"A woman I first saw in London and with whom I happened to come across here, too."

"But where did you come across her? We have barely arrived here."

Uriah told his friend about the first night they spent at Thalmuses when Gabriel was having a shower, and Uriah, feeling bored, had exited on the balcony to admire

the splendor of the Middle East. And he saw her, walking her dog in the orange grove. From their first conversation to the last, from his dreams and self regression in Father Mathias' hut, all these, Uriah Reed shared with his friend, Gabriel Archer.

"This is the truth, my friend."

Gabriel stood there awed struck, still not daring to speak.

"Father Mathias might have told me that there is no physical Eden, and he could be right, but there is a representation of the idea of heaven, and this representation is geographically located. It could have been man made after the Christianity developed, or it could have been a pagan sanctuary, lately turned into a religious site, I wouldn't know, but I know there is a Heaven outside the reality of God, outside the soul, and that is the symbol of the intelligible, that something that reflects Heaven and God in the consciousness of the people."

"Do you mean to tell me that there is no such thing as God's vessel and that we are back to where we started?"

Gabriel sounded really upset and at the same time disappointed.

"I am sorry, Gabriel. I may have misinterpreted the manuscript."

Gabriel started pacing to and fro down the room. The situation was unbelievable.

"Look, Gabriel. You should understand that my father was a member of the Order of The Wooden Cross. He believed in the Bible, and in the scriptures written by the apostles. Perhaps, even John Gos had also been a member. It doesn't matter. What it matters is that, the Order refused to understand that the apostles were

also men, the priests were also prone to error and sin, and this is the reason why we find in the Bible so many facets of God. Each nation tries to use divinity for its own advantage. The Jews have represented God as merciful with the Jews and revengeful on their enemies. On their turn, the Roman emperors used God as an ideological message, but nevertheless the real attributes of God and His very essence have been misinterpreted and falsely showed, and clogged, and I don't know any more how to tell a lie from the truth."

Gabriel stopped in front of him. On his face, one could read determination and courage.

"You cannot give up. You didn't drag me over here only to give up."

He went to the wardrobe and pulled out from one of his luggage, a tiny Bible.

"They could be stories," Gabriel continued and halted in front of Uriah, "but some of them are a genuine key to a world devoid of meaning. And I think I can find your Garden of Eden."

He opened the Bible, and after a few moments of searching, Gabriel found what he was looking for, and loudly he read it to Uriah.

"And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison; and the name of the second river is Gihon; and the name of the third river is Tigris – that is it which goeth towards the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates. And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.' – Genesis 2:10-15"

Uriah had never seen his friend in that state of passionate fervor.

"I have been thinking and doing some research while you've been away. The Garden of Eden is the spiritual nexus from where both good and evil come out, i.e. the four springs that can prove both fertile and devastating. They can nurture the crops or they can flood the land. However, they wouldn't exist had they not sprung from something. And here in Palestine, we have Mount Gerizim whose name means the navel of the earth. Well, I believe we can start from there."

Uriah nodded. He completely agreed with Gabriel. Tomorrow morning, they will travel to Mount Gerizim and search for the Valley of the Kings.

Later that night, while he was trying to fall asleep, Uriah heard Mika, playing on the harp. And instinctively, the harp of Perseus the slave came before him. It was a harp with a bull's head attached on the wooden upper frame. The bull had lapis lazuli eyes that matched the shells and precious stones decoration. Perhaps, Mika had a similar harp, and now he was using it to play.

*My heart is like a caravan that wanders in the dunes,
And not a spring from stone, its waters pushes through.
Put the blame on her, my unfaithful Fatme
Whom I shall never see as long as I'm alive.*

But I shall see the Garden...., Uriah thought before he fell asleep.

The following day, early in the morning, Uriah and Gabriel, after receiving clear instructions from Mika of how to get to Mount Gerizim, left the hotel and headed towards Queeny. The car was the only vehicle parked.

Gabriel opened the car's door, and he stepped at the wheel. Uriah was about to occupy the passenger's seat, when a pleading voice stopped him.

"Take me with you, please."

Both Gabriel and Uriah turned to face Lucien Rai who had so unexpectedly materialized himself out of the thin air in the parking lot. He seemed agitated, almost on the brink of physically collapsing. His sallow face, damp hair, and piercing eyes bore the ominous air of a pestilential threat.

“Who is this guy?” Gabriel whispered.

But Uriah didn’t have time to answer. Lucien calmly replied, without betraying his utter state of restlessness.

“I am Kha-ver⁸. I do not mean you any harm.”

Uriah looked at him attentively. There was something about this guy that invited the thought of suspicion in one’s mind.

“Where do you want to go and how do you know that we are heading into the same direction?”

“You came to me yesterday. Today it is my turn.”

“And yesterday, you concealed the meaning of your words when I asked you clear questions. Today, it is my turn.”

“Don’t play with me, librarian. I told you that the Valley of the Kings is only the beginning. I didn’t lie.”

“And what do you want now? To come with us?! Why?”

Lucien frowned. Right then, the hallo of the dawn enveloped him, and he appeared in the light of the feeble sun, both a Judah repenting for his treason and a tormented creature, craving for the initial order of the world.

“I need to come”, he faltered. “Can’t you just take me with you and stop asking questions?”

“I do not trust you, Lucien.”

Uriah’s sincere confession made Lucien burst into

laughter. It was a sinister, unhealthy, and most peculiar laughter the two British had ever heard.

"You do not trust me", he said after stopping from laughing, "but Eve trusted the serpent when he guaranteed her knowledge, and all mankind wouldn't be here hadn't been for Eve's faith into the serpent."

Gabriel shuddered, but Uriah gestured him to keep his cool.

"Are you a serpent, Lucien?" Uriah asked him.

"I am the A-sur."

Uriah understood immediately the meaning of Lucien's words. He climbed in the car, and before closing the door shut, he looked back at Lucien.

"Where we are going, you shall not follow. May you find peace upon this earth."

Lucien gnashed his teeth enraged by Uriah's defiant attitude, and when the car dashed from sight, he knew what he had to do. Everything was clear now, like a blurred mirror which had suddenly been cleansed from all the vapors and slimy things. He instinctively knew where Uriah was heading. It had to be that place.

**

When Gabriel parked the car at the bottom of Mount Gerizim, Uriah put his arm on his friend's arm and pleaded with him.

"There is one last favour that I am about to ask you, Gabriel Archer. Please, return to Thalmuses and take my manuscript and diary with you back to London."

Gabriel looked at him incredulously.

"I thought you didn't need any more to be God's vessel on earth. I thought we would both return to London."

"No. I belong here."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Find the Oneness in nature. From now on, this is my home."

Gabriel tried to talk him out of that, but Uriah didn't allow himself to be persuaded.

"Please, my friend, respect my decision."

Gabriel understood he had lost the battle.

"What am I to do with the manuscript and the diary?"

"We shall stick to the original plane."

"This meaning that I am to give them away, aren't I?"

"Indeed. And there is also something else I need you to do. Find this woman, Lalage Petrov, she is staying at the Rai's; and tell her to leave Palestine and never come back. Would you do that for me?"

"What if she doesn't want to leave?"

"Tell her I said so. She will understand."

"I really do hope you know what you are doing."

"Always."

Uriah was smiling. When he exited the car, Gabriel followed and for one last time, the two friends shook their hands and brotherly embraced each other.

"Farewell, Gabriel!"

"Farewell, Uriah!"

When Gabriel disappeared, driving his Queeny back to the village, Uriah Reed was left completely alone. Surrounded by the serenity of the forest and overshadowed by the grandiosity of Mount Gerizim, Uriah felt himself closer to God. He started walking, further advancing on the path that led in the heart of the mountains, but

right at the foot of the mountain, a serpent sprang from the ground and bit Uriah's ankle. He didn't have time to protect himself against the pitiless predator. The serpent's blow had been strategically planned, leaving the attacked person, helpless.

Uriah fell to the ground and his blue eyes became one with the heavenly abode. And he understood that in the serpent's bite had been revealed the whole secret of the Garden of Eden.

XIII

"Are you telling me that I just have to leave Palestine without any explanation from your part?"

Lalage was outraged. How dared this British assume that he knows better? How dared he come to her with such an absurd claim?

"Please, Miss Lalage. Be reasonable!" He pleaded with her.

"Reasonable?! Where is he? Where is Uriah Reed?"

"I cannot tell you. He said you would understand."

"Oh, did he? This righteous man whose wisdom never fails knows everything, doesn't he? Well, he is wrong! He doesn't know me at all."

"Please, Miss Lalage. I have played my part. I am here on his behalf. This is the message and I am nothing but the messenger. If you are wise, you'll leave this place."

"And just assume that I am not wise. What will happen then?"

"I don't know. Who knows what tomorrow can bring? Well, have a good night, Miss Lalage, and a safe journey back. I am leaving Palestine tomorrow, too. Feel free to join me, if you wish. There is nothing I would appreciate more than your company."

"Thank you, Mr. Archer, but I'll leave when I decide to. Good night and farewell!"

"Farewell, then!"

As Mr. Gabriel Archer's silhouette dissolved into

the night, Lalage fell into a bottomless pit. She threw a shawl over her shoulders and left the house. Where she was heading, she knew not. Her eyes scanned the area. Mr. Rai had still not returned, and Lucien was nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, Lalage suspected that Lucien's disappearance from home and Uriah's mysterious departure were somehow connected.

She ran and ran, passing the orange grove and heading to the sand shore. Only the wind roared and the seagulls pierced her ears with their plaintive cries. And Uriah was nowhere to be seen.

A week later, Lalage was heading back to London. The train was trailing along the tracks, faster and faster, and she was sitting all alone, like a shadow, dwelling in the memories of her short encounter with the man she had grown to love.

XIV

My name is Parsiphal Gray and I am the new chief librarian of Ex Libris. At least, I think I am Parsiphal Gray. There are days when I am not sure whether I even exist. I could be the author of this novel or I could just be the puppet in the hands of a more skilled puppeteer. My dear writer, I am so confused. I am free, but my mind gropes in the dark of the unknown and touches the chains' cold iron. Am I really enslaved? No, I am the author, but I reckon being enslaved by the darkest love I have ever felt in my life. It is this all consuming passion for writing, for waving stories in the tapestry of immortality.

But who is this man I see, rising like a ghost before me, laughing like a devil in my face? He looks familiar, yet I don't know him, and in a sort I do know him.

Reader, have you read Charles Bukowski? If not, you should. Reading Charles Bukowski's poetry is like talking to this strange man. Whenever he appears before me, I drink a boiled glass of bitter wine while the universe is laughing with guts of madding wind. His laugh...his demonic laugh...No, it is simply the laugh of disillusionment. He too is a simple man with big dreams.

The Stranger: I am sorry and I feel ashamed for having thought I could create the perfect work of art. There is no perfection in this world. I wanted myself a master, although unfortunately, please, look what has become of me. Here I am before you, the shadow of a

master and the embodiment of a slave.

Parsiphal Gray: Who are you? Who am I?

The Stranger (laughing): You haven't realized it yet?

Parsiphal Gray (with sadness in his voice): No.

The Stranger: You are my character, my vessel into which I poured my essence. But I am not the Raven of the Gods. I am just an ordinary crow who dreams of turning into an eagle.

Parsiphal Gray: Why are you talking like this?

The Stranger (is not listening to him): This time, I am not looking back. I am done with crows.

Parsiphal Gray (quoting Albert Einstein) : "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is."

The Stranger: If there are no miracles, life is not worth living; and if everything is a miracle, what will be the beauty of a miracle, then? It would simply cease to exist. Who was the moron who found these two ways of life?

Parsiphal Gray: A most brilliant man...Albert Einstein.

The Stranger: He doesn't seem so brilliant to me. I know people who are ten times brilliant than him. One of them is the village's fool who every Sunday approached the church and begged for mercy. He knew that on that day only, the purses easily open. He waited on that day, like a lover waiting to embrace his sweetheart; and that day only was his sole comfort and solace. And do you know what he said when he died? He said that the beauty of life is like the tolls of a belfry. And he was right. All good things come in proportion and gradually, if everything were a miracle, then the bells wouldn't have to toll, in order to

let the people know that the sacred hour has come upon the earth. Everything would be sacred already, with the only difference that people wouldn't know that. Sacred and miracles would cease to be recognized, and wouldn't that be a shame?

Parsiphal Gray: Indeed.

(After a short pause of silence)

Parsiphal Gray: Why have you chosen me for a character?

The Stranger: I didn't choose you. You were already there. I just had to knead you into shape, according to my tastes. You see, sometimes, a picture has to be adjusted in order to fit into the frame, or a frame has to be carved according to the picture's dimension. It is either one or the other, but the picture and the frame always exist. They only change in time and space.

Parsiphal Gray: It means that I am one with Uriah Reed, and even with Lalage?

The Stranger: And even with myself.

Parsiphal Gray: But why have you chosen this name for me?

The Stranger: You don't like it? I thought it suited you. Like a gray knight, wanting to achieve greatness, although the grim reality was not as colorful and chivalrous as you had thought, your name couldn't have suited you better.

Parsiphal Gray: I don't like my name.

The Stranger: Then change it.

Parsiphal Gray: I can't. You are my author.

The Stranger: What if it is the other way around?

What if the creation creates the creator?

Parsiphal Gray: I don't understand.

The Stranger: Well, it's simple. I wouldn't be an author without a unique gallery of characters, but all characters are emanations of a single universal character. The moment I use this character and bring him to life, I invest him with a mind and soul of his own. Nevertheless, when he speaks and acts, he gives voice to my own ideological messages, thus, he creates me as an author by representing my ideology.

Parsiphal Gray: You speak so strange and yet I understand. But I don't understand how I can understand what I don't understand...

The Stranger (laughed again): This is the real meaning of life. A man doesn't understand how he understands that he is not alone in this universe and that there is a God above, even though his mind cannot grasp the knowledge of the soul. This is my most beloved, Parsiphal Gray, God's real vessel on earth, i.e. the knowledge of an unbreakable communion between God and man. Furthermore, the beauty of it all is that the communion between heaven and earth also refers to the communion between two loving souls whose breaths mingle into one spiritual sphere of both light and darkness. Light symbolizes the soul, whereas darkness is a metaphor for the corporeal, like a cape that covers the nakedness, and thus vulnerability of the soul.

Parsiphal Gray: I think I can understand now.

The Stranger: I knew you would.

Parsiphal Gray (with a little hesitation): Why are you so sad?

The Stranger: I must be sad so that I may one day know happiness. Unfortunately, my own work of art has

to be imperfect, so that perfection may form at its core, just like a lily of the valley. If my dark complexion and mood make you think of a raven; then I must appear a crow, so that one day I may get the plumage of an eagle.

Parsiphal Gray: What is your name?

The Stranger: Just call me Za-ken, for I have lived many lives on earth, and just one in Heaven; and I have created many stories, and yet it was just one, never-ending and tantalizing that speaks about the truth of a man's journey through the mists of time and space. And you are the representation of my Self, as well as the other way around. I am your strange other, and you are mine, and together we are writing this novel, and together we are God's vessels of creative chiaroscuro. We are the dwellers of this realm of opposites, but nevertheless, a realm in which creation wouldn't be perfect had not all these imperfections impressed themselves on the soul and body of mankind.

XV

"Have you ever watched a bird flying?"

Lalage turned her eyes away from the fireplace. She could now fully see the man's face. So far she had avoided looking at him, but now she wanted to hear his answer. But the man didn't know what to say. He couldn't find the proper means to express what was going on inside his mind. It wasn't the first time he couldn't utter a word when she was around. She had that intimidating air which could freeze someone on the spot. He kept his unyielding position near the fireplace, but his eyes betrayed uncertainty. Suddenly, he seemed not to belong there. He was out of place and out of time, and Lalage knew that.

"You've never had time, haven't you?" Her tone was bittersweet. "The sky is always too clouded for the one busy to tread the world by foot. Although the earth revolves around the sun, it is doomed to keep itself motionless while the shadow of all creatures passes over it. You may master the earth, but one day it is going to be the other way around. But then only the dreamless slumber waits for thee. If only you had raised your eyes, you would have seen the wings of the birds, spread with the wind. This, my friend, is a portrait you don't get to see in any museum, because it is not merely life that it depicts, but utter freedom. If you had seen that, you would have understood that once the flight begins,

the bird will know no rest, she won't look back until the perfect tree is spotted. And it this on this tree that she will build her new nest."

The fire kept burning, roaring like a red lion inside the declivity of the wall. The warm light had spread itself through the room, as mysteriously and silent as an ancient ritualistic fire. Lalage and the silent man seemed to have been wrapped in the gauze of the shadowy dusk. They were facing each other like two pagan deities who fight over a patriarchal world where man and woman meet at the border between myth and reality.

"Why are you here?"

It was a normal question. However, he didn't feel at ease. A moment ago his reason for being there seemed logic, but not anymore. He couldn't tell precisely the cause for his inner turmoil. It was either the fact she didn't seem to be happy to see him or because he once again failed to make himself understood. He tried to control himself and went for the briefcase he had laid on a chair. When opened, the briefcase pierced the silence with a rusty cry. He took out a manuscript tied with a purple ribbon.

"I want you to edit my memories. I have here all the necessary data, every memory which haunted and stayed with me. Your job is only to bestow upon them a literary frame so that the manuscript may one day be read."

Lalage smiled.

"Some people spend their whole lives trying to forget, running away from their past."

"I am not running away anymore", he said fixing her with his haunting eyes.

"Why do you want to remember?"

"I want you to remember."

Lalage shook her head.

"You've come to the wrong person."

"Lalage..."

He called her by the name, and his whisper died in the turmoil of her thoughts.

"You are in your mid forties", she reminded him.
"Usually, memories are written when one feels the future has nothing more in store for him."

"Indeed. Nevertheless, when I try to think ahead, to pierce the veil of the unknown, my mind is blocked. I don't see anything. I desperately try to catch the faintest glimpse into the next moment, but all I can see is exile, separation, and grief. Only when I write, my clouded judgment becomes clearer. I began to put down my thoughts many years ago. This idea of writing to yourself, and in a way of being in deep conversation with your own spirit brought me comfort. But nothing could have prepared me for the experience of loving you."

"Please, stop it."

"Why would I stop? It is true. I have loved you ever since I laid my eyes on you, and through all this maze of darkness, you've been my light and my inspiration."

Lalage lowered her head and avoided his eyes.

"Still, you left me behind."

"I had no other choice."

"There is always a choice."

"I didn't see it back then."

"You didn't want to see it."

"I am sorry", he sadly whispered, and he really meant it.

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"I began writing this manuscript", he continued, "after I realized that my memories shouldn't be lost."

Perhaps, in a way I wanted something to be forever mine. I wanted permanence, and nothing is more permanent than the past. The manuscript also contains the memory of my wonderful years as librarian and researcher, the most intense period of my life. It is all so alive in my mind that I am afraid I might forget. Who knows if tomorrow I will even be here, waiting to see the last flight of a bird?"

"Don't tell me that you are afraid of dying? You've always thought yourself unbreakable."

"I am not afraid. I just want to be ready. There comes a time in one's life when the thought of dying prevails over any idea of immortality. This thought has often crossed the mind of the outcast creature you see in front of you. I have already experienced social death."

"You have to fight back. I have never thought that you will ever back up."

"It's pointless now. " He was silenced for a moment. "Look, I have to publish my memories. I need to be remembered."

"People don't want to remember librarians who did nothing for them. They want real people who never give up and fight with honour."

The man's face suddenly turned red. He nervously started pacing the room, threatening with his fists unseen enemies.

"What do I care about people? I don't care about the idiotic mass which craves for real people in an amphitheater of puppets and marionettes."

"You used to care about people."

"Not anymore. I want you, to be remembered by you only."

"Why should I remember you?"

"You should remember me for trying to save

humanity, for searching the holy truth of being in this world, and for loving you with all the fiber of my soul."

"You failed to save humanity."

"I fought the best I could, but when I lost the very thing that made my battle worth fighting, I ceased to be real. I ducked and chose a numb life. Nobody knows where I live or what I do. Still, I want to be remembered. I need to be remembered. Not by people, but by the only person that is my people."

His hand held forth the manuscript, but she didn't take it or move from the place she was sitting. He waited until he realized that nothing would happen; then he threw down the manuscript. It fell and hit the floor. Dust rose from the wooden board, and the fire roared louder. They looked in each other's eyes and they both knew there would never be a next time for them. He put on his hat and turned to the door. Lalage could hear his steps as he walked out of her house and out of her life.

Long minutes passed until she was able to move from the fireplace. She ducked and let her eyes hover over the manuscript. The covers seemed to roll the film of an old and forgotten memory that now had come to life. And in that remembrance, she had told him about her dream of living in the heart of the mountains, in a wooden house next to a water stream. That would have been her haven, where she could spend her life writing far away from the civilized world. And she had found this dream place where she wrote her literature at a wooden table, while the birds were singing and the springs were sprightly dancing. She had also found her peace, far away from society, far away from him.

Lalage took the manuscript from the floor. She

opened it. On the first page he had written a dedication.

"To L...

We were both two people who dreamt of a better society. This is the danger with all dreams. You get to believe they might come true. Then you wake up, and reality shows its ugly face. Our mistake is that we've seen the failure in each other and we've condemned our souls to walk separate paths. But here I am at the beginning of a new journey, and I wouldn't want any companion but you."

Lalage closed the manuscript. She was furious with him. How dared he enter in her life again? How dared he search for her, and reappear when she succeeded to forget? She went again to the fireplace, ready to thrust the manuscript into the flames. It would wipe out all memories, the past itself. But as she was getting ready to do it, a bird flew by her window. And its wings touched the glass pane with a faint musical echo of pure flight. Lalage stopped and listened. The bird was now sitting on a high branch, watching with her beamy eyes the movements of the woman inside the hut. Lalage stood up, still holding the manuscript in her hands. She approached the window, and for a moment the bird and the woman looked each other in the eye, meeting in a dialogue that knew no words, but feelings. It was a blue bird, the one you fail to see it in the sky, as she unites her plumage with the colour of the high horizon. Lalage opened the window, and the bird spread her wings and flied away, carrying her songs where the woman couldn't reach her.

Lalage understood what she had to do. She wouldn't let the man alone on his final path. She would make him see the flight of the blue bird. She would...She just knew she would...

**

"It is said that every story begins in a certain time and space. We come in this world to suffer pain and be healed by hope and happiness, even if it is nothing but illusory. This is the trap life puts in our way until we wake up surrounded by our wasted energy and unfulfilled dreams, hunted by these skeletons of a man's life in our own den. What more can we do? On each side of the dice there is a harlequin of hazard. He laughs at our misfortunes, of our weaknesses. And we humbly lower our heads and learn the law of the club, i.e. an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We vainly try to claim our place in the world, our right to be here. This is the sinful hubris of wanting permanence, a right exclusively reserved for the Gods. And mourning becomes our life. The carnival keeps going. We make our chests drums for the fist of courage to beat in, and we boast in front of our fellow creatures. What great deeds have we accomplished... Then, of course, we are waiting for a standing ovation. We long to be appreciated, to receive titles. The only standing ovation we get is fate applauding our disappointment. Beaten, we still try a last salvation. We take a seat in the dusk of our life and try to reconcile ourselves with the past. We shake hands with our former selves and make peace, even if it is nothing but the dream of a dream in the dream of a dreamer's dreamy dream.

My life story begins with the coming of the fall. Perhaps there is a reason why people gather their crops at fall. Karma, destiny, or name it as you wish, always takes care that one reaps what one has sown. In my case, the harvest was rich. I came from a wealthy family, but when I decided to join the society of knowledge lovers, my

prestige and money accounts got bigger from day to day. Soon, I was the chief librarian of the prestigious Ex Libris library, and the bills for all the books I kept buying were incredibly adding one after another. Of course, I didn't know back then that books in the wrong hands can crush a human soul, or better said a book's or a manuscript's interpretation can have seriously consequences. It was later when I found myself at a crossroads. The Devil and God himself were waiting to see what path I would choose. Be careful when it comes to you. There is no way back after you've made your choice. A single wrong step and boom... You expand into the universe. The explosion burns everything to ashes. And then you die to be reborn.

I have done deeds I am ashamed to confess in public. Not because I am afraid. Neither am I ashamed, nor stubborn. No. It's just there are skeletons you better not disturb as they quietly hang hidden in your closet. So, I raise my glass for all the bold, for all people who sleep dreamlessly at night. I have forgotten the taste of sleep on my pillow. Lately, not even my solitude has been a good company. But let's give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, i.e. let's give oblivion the pleasure of anamnesis.

There is no use to torment ourselves thinking how we could have altered things that had already happened. What is done is good done. Even if I could bid time return, and I had the opportunity of going back with all the knowledge I possess today, I would still choose the same path. Going other way around, making a different choice would make me a happier man, but never the happiest man who lived the shortest and most blessing happiness a man could feel in his life. Taking another path would mean not having met the only person in this world who filled my soul with the sacred blessing of joy. I shall talk

about this particular person later in my confession. For now, let's go back in the present of that past fall.

Monday, September, 2, 1896.

The "Ergo Deus Est" Society is hosting a charitable event. I feel like laughing at the very thought of this charade. I know the members of this society by heart. They always want something in return. Their actions are never pro bono. But I have to be there. I had promised my father. He was going to introduce me to Mr. Gordon, the governor he played chess with. His acquaintance would provide me a free ticket to the world of politics, a domain I was not interested at all. But I couldn't tell my father. It would crush the poor man's heart.

The carriage is waiting for me outside. Metal coloured and silent, it is waiting to grind the gravel under its wheels. I love this carriage. I leave the house and climb inside. The coachman greets me like usually. The black steeds hit nervously with their hoofs the damp earth. The whip rises menacingly into the air, like a dragon of twisted rope, and with a heavy blow, it falls onto the back of the steeds. The horses neigh and start trotting ahead.

I move aside the curtains and allow my eyes to wander through the mysteries of the night. The beauty of my country, of my village is exhilarating. Taking a deep breath of air, I close my eyes. Right now, I don't think about anything. I just want to feel the speed.

I remember passing over rustic cottages whose chimneys were puffing wavy trails of smoke. Now and then, solitary lamp posts appeared along the way. Tall, black, like hermits of bygone days, these solitary figures bristled over the alleys. And their blinding light, along

with the faces of late passers-by, the night air, all that made me think for the first time where I was heading to.

I am not into politics. My soul craves for something else. So often I have pictured myself sitting on a mahogany desk with a plume tipped in ink, writing the landscapes of my imaginary world. Of course, I also tried to paint the colours of my mind, but it is not enough. I paint and then rage comes over me, and I throw the brush away, and my first intention is to tear the painting with my teeth and nails, because it is not enough. I need words...the poison of words...I need to paint the words of my imaginary world, until the real world becomes mute and dumb, and far away in time and space.

Who am I? Who are all these people living in tiny thatched huts that resemble some leaden boxes of matches? And especially, on this particular night we all wear masks. We move through our histories, like China dolls, perishable and fragile, gamboling in the wires of a Puppet-Maker. We get so accustomed to have someone who despotically chooses our steps for us that we even end up loving the chains that bind us. I am not free. Look at me. I am following my father's demand of taking part to an event which I loathe and despise for its falsity. Everything is going to be so boring, even the small talk with my father's friend, the governor. But I will be surrounded by the so called high-society, whose only height is the summit of its vices. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, I am part of this society, and I am no good than this bunch of spoiled people. A bad lot, this is what we all are.

The building where the event is organized belonged to my family until my father decided that it was better to donate it for a good cause. At the main entrance,

the usher bowed with deference before me. His bushy beard could almost touch the ground. I analysed him mischievously. If I gave him a push, he would certainly fall flat in his nose. Of course, I refrained from doing that. Yes, it would have been a funny sight, but that would only have enraged my father. The old man has never wanted a boy, but a man, a future Leonid Fennimore Junior.

I step inside. The main hall is crowded with people. The air is filled with revelry and sickening perfumes. And all the faces smile to each other. They are comrades and business partners. At first glance one would estimate they are the best of friends when in fact they are really plotting against one another. I know all this from my father. He had given me a full description of my future life as a politician, and he missed no detail.

“Leonidas!”

I hated that appellative. My name is Leonid, not Leonidas. I even agree with being called “Lee” or “Leon”, but not Leonidas. Whenever a person called me “Leonidas”, I instinctively thought about king Leonidas of Sparta, and I was no warrior. In fact, I hate the war. I abhor the perspective of mangled bodies and wolfish fiends that would strip a human soul of all the inherent natural good.

“Leonidas!”

I could no longer ignore the call. It was the voice of my father, inviting me to join his table. He was in the company of Mr. Gordon. Reluctantly, I head for their direction, and when I get there I make a courtly bow. I take my seat at their table, after politely greeting my father and the governor. A red tinge had coloured the plump cheeks of Mr. Gordon. I bet he tasted all the liquors around here. Still, that isn’t enough. Nothing is enough

for a man accustomed to have everything at his disposal. I follow his example and take a glass from the table. We all have a drink together. The whisky burns my entrails, and cheers my spirit.

"There will be a meeting, young man, at the House of Commons. We need to stand united. These are hard times and tension is in the air."

His voice is croaked and it annoys my ear. He uses a superior tone, and I assume he is thinking how grateful I must be feeling for his company and attention. Bullshit. I don't give a damn about his puny being. Luckily, he can't see inside my mind, or else the governor would have me hanging by the end of a rope in the gallows. Then he begins talking about my future, how lucky I am to work with him and join the right wing. I hear words as 'career', 'bright future', 'power', 'money'...Blah, Blah, Blah....My stomach quenches. I fill another glass, and the whisky sets my entrails on a blasting fire. I am a God damn Phoenix. I smile, watching Mr. Gordon's fat mouth grinding huge teeth under a black moustache. I nod and approve everything he says. Then I look at my father and my eyes speak to him.

Have I ever disappointed you?

I can tell by how awkward he's scanning my figure that I am a huge disappointment. I mean, he is a lawyer, and a successful one, while his own son dreams more than he should act. However, he is at least satisfied that I haven't opened my mouth to talk rubbish, that is according to his vision, me giving a glimpse of what I truly desire to accomplish in life, i.e. writing literature and doing abstract and surreal painting.

Yes, I have been a good boy tonight, a most obedient and loving son who hasn't shamed his father.

Then, why am I so wretched about it?

I feel like throwing up. Instead I help myself with some caviar. Let the common mass eat bread, while the elite satisfy their hunger with caviar. The champagne trembles in the crystal cups which had been spread all over the place. I only see circles of wavering waves mirroring our forgotten origins, when people used to quench their thirst with fresh water. I miss what I have never had. Let the music play and oblivion dance! It is the music of a never-ending Satyricon, reminding people of a mysterious banquet thrown by the modern version of Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus. I almost expect to see twittering birds pecking on the inside of a roasted pig, or to see displayed before me the exquisite dish with the signs of the zodiac. But unlike Gaius Petronius Arbiter, the creator of Trimalchio, I am the observer of a bunch of people who longed for the golden light of jewelry and precious metals, and not for satire and catharsis. O tempora, o mores! Wallets open and money come out. It is all for a good cause. Isn't it always for a good cause? I watch my wallet open itself, as my glass fills and refills, and my entrails burn and burn and burn...I am a God damn Phoenix of ashes.

The President of 'Ergo Deus Est' Society approaches my father. He wants my father, since he owned the building, to give a speech. I should have guessed that my father would pass that honour to me, since I am his only son and heir. The President throws me a cunning smile. His thick hairy eyebrows make him look like an old stork. I followed this weird bird to a platform where a scene had been improvised. I look at all those people gathered there. They all seem monkeys, caged in frocks and unbecoming garments. Trying not to laugh at them, I cough and find my voice.

"Honorable guests, I salute you and wish to thank you for having chosen to follow the call of humanism. We are all a big family. And in each family, there is a Patriarch, a supreme Father who keeps all members together. In our family, The Patriarch is God. He binds us through our love for the other, a universal feeling that incorporates values and honour. We, the last Quixotic knights, we fight with the wind mills of corruption, setting a democratic state against a pseudo-Marxist nation. We mustn't forget that we form a Union where equality, culture, and liberty function as an ontological paradigm. Yes, we are defined by our deeds. We are the sum of our own actions. Thus, let us always do justice! Let us always be compassionate! Let us always be close to each other. In every one of us there is the image of God. Let us then be micro Gods on earth, and true sons of our Heavenly Father!"

I have never heard so many people applauding. Certainly, no one had paid attention to all the nonsense of my small talk, but they certainly liked the last part. Or perhaps they were just applauding because they saw others doing the same. The instinct of the common flock always prevailed. You throw a handful of grass in front of a flock of sheep, and every sheep follows the one that heads for the grass, even if it leads them to an open precipice. The same happens to human nature as well.

After the speech, I return to my table. My father is satisfied and proud. He had forgotten he was the one who wrote my speech, just in case he was asked to speak in front of the people and couldn't extricate himself from such a situation by using me as pawn. He planned it all from the beginning. The High Puppet-Maker took care to move me in the light of Mr. Gordon's appreciation. And he succeeded. His Excellency the Governor, Mr. Gordon

pats me on the back. Even though my inner self recoils in disgust, I manage to subdue the roar of rage and revolt. I stand there, like a trained puppy, and all I can do is smile. I am surrounded by a wall of laughter and booze. The same old symphony... The same utopian mask of a cold society... The same clamor. But then, nothing lasts for long, and always something preordained changes the course of a man's life.

"Interesting speech!" I hear a girlish voice coming from behind.

I rapidly turn around, and locate the speaker. It was the voice of a young woman who was sitting at a near-by table. She couldn't be more than sixteen years old. I watched her cunning smile, and a frozen crust cracked inside my chest. For the first time, I felt the warmth of the other's recognition, i.e. the alive other living in a society of the dead fools.

That girl was the only one present there that had seen through me. She was young and beautiful, and I was on the summit of my boyhood, contemplating the rise of a man's world. Despite me being with at least ten years older, I was still young and sensitive to a woman's beauty, and her eyes had already put me at the pillory. I was accused of committing the deadly sin of lying. I could read both contempt and amusement in those black eyes of hers. She had read the text behind my speech. And I had read my death sentence behind unuttered words. Yet, I knew she was right. There was I, a wolf cub trying to bark and run with the wolves. And she had seen that. I turned my eyes from her and looked the other way around, but wherever I looked, I only saw the contempt of her black eyes. Even when Mr. Gordon talked, her voice came from the depths of immemorial time, whispering into my year

the same enchanting and haunting phrase:

"Interesting speech!"

**

Lalage closed again the manuscript. Outside, the wind howled and blasted the sprays of the tall fir-trees. She went again to the window. The sun was setting, a ball of quenched fire rolling down the mountain slopes as if it had been pushed by an invisible hand. Her heart was also rolling down, heavier and heavier. She remembered now.

When he first walked her home from a party meeting, the sun was also setting, but it didn't roll down the mountain. The sun descended over the gates of the village, like a key locking the precincts away from unwanted intruders. The ominous ball of fire, lingered for a while over the summit of plaster and over fields of concrete.

Leonid walked beside her. She struggled to keep up the pace. He had asked her about her life, her passions. It was the first time, their discussion was getting personal.

"I love literature, reading and writing," she answered. Everything about Art fascinates me. I like to read as if I am part of the story, and to write as if there were not a story, but genuine life."

"Have you written something so far?"

"I am saving myself for the perfect time."

"And when will that be?"

"That will be when I have a place of my own, in the heart of the mountains. Of course, I can write here as well, but I could never conceive my work of art in the bustling turmoil of our local community. I need the blessing of nature."

He looked at her with surprise. She knew Leonid

wasn't expecting her to be so poetical. She had always been tough, at least tougher than him.

"How about you? Do you write?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, Aleksandra. I am writing something, but I cannot read it to you."

"Why not?"

"It's much too personal. I've put too much soul in it."

She pouted.

"You should have saved some soul for our wedding as well. You are seriously making me want to reconsider my choice."

Leonid laughed and embraced her.

"Do you think I would ever give you up? Not even death can take you away from me."

His arms fiercely grabbed her and wrapped her waist. He wove her in the air, causing her to giggle, but he immediately gauged her mouth with violent kisses that left her breathless.

"If you want to know, I'll tell you", he said after they had seated on the grass among the wild flowers of the country.

"Yes, I want to know."

"I am working on a novel about a librarian. He has recently been hired and imagine his surprise when one day, he receives the strange manuscript and diary of a former librarian. Uriah Reed, i.e. the former librarian who had left everything behind, even the love of his life, and everything for an illusion, for the quest of God's essence on earth."

"It sounds interesting. I can hardly wait to read."

"But what is more interesting is that the action takes place in the 21st century, and our character, Uriah

Reed experiences along the way all sorts of bizarre things, from metempsychosis to physical death."

"And what happens to the woman he loves?"

"She gets to see him one day, for the last time. He comes to her and asks her to write his memories, but not his present memories, but the memories of a past life's love story where he had been the happiest man of all men."

"Can there be a man happier than you are or a woman more loved than I am, even though they are fictional characters?"

He kissed her forehead, pressing gently with his lips the velvet of her skin.

"I am Uriah Reed, because every character is just another facet of the author. And you are my Andromeda, my Lalage, and my Aleksandra. You are the representation of my Garden of Eden."

She laughed.

"You see how much I love you, don't you?"

"I don't know. Help me see clearly."

He kissed her again.

"Are you still reluctant to marry me?"

"It depends."

Another shower of kisses fell upon the petals of the woman's lips.

"I will marry you."

"And will you make me a son?"

"I don't know about that. Am I not enough for you?"

"I want a son to go hunting with or sailing down the icy waters, a son whom I could instruct how to read and write, or even paint if he likes to."

She puckered her lips.

"What if I have a daughter? Have you thought about that?"

"I don't want a daughter. I want a male heir."

"Why not an heiress?"

"There is only one woman in my life, and that is you. I wouldn't want a daughter."

"You make it sound so bad," she retorted, "but let me remind you that we are in this together. As much as you desire a son, the same I want a daughter whom I could teach to play the piano, and sew, and even paint if she likes to."

He nodded approvingly, although the girl sensed his mind was troubled by something.

"What's the matter now?"

"I just want to know if you could be someone else, what would you choose to be?"

Aleksandra answered promptly.

"A writer of freedom or a blue bird, one with the sky and with all eternity..."

"And why can't you be both?"

"You can't be both. You always have to choose."

"And what would you choose?"

"A blue bird..."

"And I would follow you. I will always choose you."

"But you wouldn't catch me. The more you strive to get me, the higher I ascend."

**

August, 9, 1897

For a moment, listening to her talk about becoming a blue bird, I had the feeling she would instantly fly away, leaving me on earth. I was afraid. I was always afraid to lose her. I was much too happy for the gods to allow me to keep her in my life. That is why fear would seize me unexpectedly like an invisible arm wrapping itself around my neck, pressing and pressing, till my lungs couldn't contain the vital oxygen any longer.

This sensation, I had also experienced in my childhood when my mother blew all the candles off and wished me good night. After the door closed in slow motion, I was no longer able to see her, and I wondered what she was doing. I was afraid I might not see her in the morning, and my fears all came true one day. I was six and when I went in the kitchen, I noticed that she was not there. And neither was she in the dining room or the living room. It was strange. She always woke up early in the morning. But on that morning, everything had changed.

I climbed the stairs to her room. There was a creepy silence all over the house. When I found myself in front of the door, I knocked, but no reply came. Still, from within the chamber, faintly sobs reached my hearing. The sobs were familiar, although I had never heard my father crying. The outcome is easy to be guessed. I opened the door and peep inside. The servants, my father, they had all gathered around the bed of my mother who seemed to be sleeping a heavy sleep. In their agitation, they had forgotten about me, and only when I approached my father and tugged his sleeve, he remembered he still had a son. Still, I think, it took him a while to actually see me. But when he did understand that I had come there, he simply pulled me to his chest and hugged me.

My father had power and influence. I was entrusted to him, and I have never seen my mother since then. Her body had gone to earth, while her soul had sprung from the cage of the physical remains and soared to eternity.

Now, Aleksandra stood next to me, talking about distant horizons and blue birds that fly without looking back. Somehow I wanted her forever with me. Despite my wishes, time went by, and soon it was the hour of our descent back into the village. And when she headed for the street she lived on, I heard her heartbeats. She was saying goodbye. Aleksandra was about to lose herself in the crowd that was heading in the same direction.

The streets had never been more crowded. Then I did something I thought I would never do. I ran after her, pushing my way with my elbows. I tramped someone's foot and forgot to apologize. I had eyes only for her slender figure. Strangely, the thought of calling her name didn't cross my head or maybe I wanted her name not to be heard. Like a secret password, I was the only one I knew how to use it. Luckily, I got to Aleksandra and caught her by the hand. She turned to me, startled at first, but then relieved to see it was only me. We looked in each other's eyes. Long seconds passed and neither of us could say something. We were both prowling the inevitable, waiting the other to speak first.

I asked her faltering.

"When will I see you again?"

She was silent for a moment. What is she thinking of now? I waited for her answer as if my whole life had depended upon it. I even hated her for not being like the rest of women, always trying to get my attention. But then I wouldn't have liked her.

"There is nothing in this world that can stop a man from seeing the woman he wants to see."

She smiled at me and pressed my hand with her little fingers. I didn't get the chance to ask if that was a yes or no. She released her hand from my grip, and left, flying from me like a blue bird, without looking back.'

**

March, 25, 1909

The bell disturbed the silence of the morning, echoing gravely in my heart. Franchise and incense floated in the air, and I felt tired. Last night I didn't get the chance to rest. The writers' meeting lasted till late after midnight. The moment I got home, I fell on my bed without even changing my clothes. I am lucky for having a very efficient secretary. She phoned me at 7 o'clock a.m. sharp to remind me of the appointment I had with my colleagues from the Union of Creative Writing. When I heard the phone ringing, I cursed the damned machine with all my heart.

I quickly had a shower which was invigorating. It helped to wake me up.

Now, here I am, together with some of my fellow writers attending the Sunday sermon. The president of our Union wants people to consider him a right and just individual, thus he tries to pose as a pious citizen. I will never understand how people, although they recognize the wolf, they allow him to guard the sheep.

I know that every promise of power and wealth mocked me in the face. I was powerless and poor compared with the mighty and richness of those pure at heart.

"Are you fine, son?"

A priest had come across the bench I was sitting on, away from the church, from the president who was praying inside, and from all the people squatted in front of painted angels and saints.

"I am fine," I replied, wanting him to go away and leave me alone.

He didn't leave. I offered him a faint smile, but he obstinately refused to go inside the church. He took a place by my side, diffusing the odour of incense around me. Instinctively, I scooped over, afraid of being too close to his holy presence. Moreover, I could not refrain myself from throwing furtive glances at him. The priest was thin and ragged, resembling a hermit that lives far away from mankind. His appearance sent shivers through my spine, making me aware of the neatly costume I was wearing. The priest didn't seem to notice my costly clothes. His eyes were piercing the sky, and only later he began talking. His voice sounded peaceful, like Dante's Virgil guiding a soul through the valley of the material world. Humbly, I listened. Even now, after all these years, his voice still resounds from another world. He, the last martyr of Christ and worthy heir of Heaven, tries in aeternum to enliven hope and faith in people.

"Son, a lot of incense has burnt since I came to this church for the first time. I have even forgotten my age, but I have kept God close. I kept Him in my heart and in my thoughts, and I fed my soul only with prayers. I have only counted my briars and the canons. They are the only ones that tell me how many days and nights have passed. My ears have only heard songs of appraisal. I know by heart each toll of bell. And I love them all, even if the bells foretell death or wedding. It is then I know that God hears and remembers his children."

I have lived all my life in this church, never leaving outside its gates. Still, I have seen the world. I have travelled as far as the eye can reach and the mind could understand. I have seen the fall of Babylon, and my feet tramped over its accursed ruins. These very feet crashed the clay of Bali and Astarte. I cried with the Lamb on the cross, and next to Him I shall be feasting in the new Sion."

I was listening mesmerized, absorbed by the priest's spirit. He was talking without looking at me, and I admired his hermit-like charm.

"A lot of people had been in and out this church, and everyone had his sins and his own kindness. I have learnt to recognize the soul and to read the eyes of people. Your soul, my son, is not at peace with itself."

"You can truly read people, father."

"No", he sadly denied. "I am not allowed to read inside one's soul. This can only be done by God. I can only see the light or darkness and to guess whether there is peace or confusion inside a soul. I've approached you to ease your burden, but I can't uproot pain. This is all up to you."

"There is no hope for me, father."

"There is forgiveness for all. God's love is immeasurable."

"The deeds I've done cannot be forgotten."

I stopped to take a deep breath of air before I began my confession. Without an explanation, I felt the need of confessing to that queer priest. I wanted him to know me, but mostly I wanted him to weight my soul.

"Father, I have killed, I have cheated, and destroyed lives. My sole purpose was to get power. Not that sort of political power. I am referring to the control over the fate of the one I most loved in this world. And yet,

I failed to save her. I have killed her, father, with my blind desire to have a son. I murdered her who was so pure and innocent, since I imposed motherhood on her when she wasn't ready for such a burden. And father, I cheated her. On her deathbed, I cursed my soul and this life, I proclaimed the supreme Anathema, and I cursed death, and fall to her knees and promised her immortality. But I lied, and she knew I was lying. How furious she was, and didn't rest until I asked for God's forgiveness. Despite my struggle to keep her alive, she died. I destroyed, Father, the most sacred thing in my life, and then I wanted to destroy myself. When I first held a weapon in my hand, I felt strong, above the laws of men. The desire for power had clouded my judgment and I pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced my chest, but God wanted to punish me and kept me alive. It was not a fatal shoot. For several days and nights, I prowled the streets. It felt like a never-ending nightmare and I was wandering through the maze of my own hell. And I plunge into booze and brothels. Father, I have sinned, and ironically, my love for her, instead of keeping her safe, made me betray the only woman I had ever loved. I lied and did everything for the power of mastering death. Sadly though, I failed to order the shadows of death away from her dying body. And Father, now I am miserable and not even my writing provides me solace. And I know I will keep going like this, because there is no way back."

The priest listened to all my confession, and wrote in his heart every fleeting memory I have shared with him, as well as all the names of the persons whom I had done wrong, beginning with my beloved. When I finished, he spoke again.

"The desire for power made even the Angel of Light fall from the sky. As blinded as you are, he who shall

not be named has once been. He let himself deceived and worked against his Father. If he, a celestial and beloved creature, sinned, how could a man stand up before vice? I do not judge you. We all have a cross to carry. Go all the way. This is your faith. Redemption may take a lot of forms. Go all the way to God. May Heaven guide your steps!"

The priest crossed himself and after blessing me, he went away. I had never felt more troubled. I had expected him to blame me, to scold me, to excommunicate me. Instead, he showed me kindness and sympathy. He showed me forgiveness.

I was about to go inside the church when I heard the song of a bird. From a near-by tree, a bird hidden behind the green foliage was singing her song. The bird was confessing to the sky, and to the eternal nature. She was singing her song of liberty. And I was listening, humbled by the power of such a tiny creature of making her soul heard. And I forgave her; I forgave her for having left me, for flying without looking back.

**

September, 9, 1919

"Quickly, quickly!"

Voices were darting all around me. I couldn't see the faces, but I assumed they were fighting for my life. Life always battles with death. It is a play as old as time. The end is unpredictable, and the gain consists in getting more time. As much time as possible...

Pain crossed my joints like an arrow.

“Open the door!”

A loud noise of rusty hinges blows in my ears, and I know the door has been opened. I am very surprised how I can still hear, how I can still think.

“Just hang on in there...”

I try to breathe. My lungs hurt so much, and I can feel the smell of medicines. It burns my entrails. But I am no longer a damn Phoenix. I am just a caterpillar crushed by the wings of its butterfly self.

How did I get here?

The last thing that I remember is having driven my car through a mountainous path. I parked at the bottom of a slope, and headed on foot. But where? Yes, I was heading to see her. Oh, my God, everything is so confusing. A moment ago I was climbing over rocks, and now I am lying on a hospital bed.

I can't feel my feet. Still, I feel my arms lifted by other hands covered in gloves, and then sharp pinches pierce my flesh. I want to shout to their faces that I will be fine. I am strong enough to recover. I have survived so many years by myself that I don't need anyone around me. But nothing comes out of my mouth. People used to love my discourse. They kept telling me how great my power of persuasion was. And now, I cannot even persuade myself into talking.

“Interesting speech!”

A leaden mail has covered my eyes, and I cannot lift my eyelids, but I know she is not there. She hasn't been there for such a long time.

A flickering light fell over my face. Damned doctors....Why don't they repair the electric bulbs? What have they done with all the funds allocated for hospital innovation? If I were awake, I would give them a lesson.

But for the moment, they are teaching me to live again.

Tic...Tic...Tic....The heart pumps blood, allowing the oxygen to fill my lungs.

"Thanks God, his pulse is regular."

It was the triumphant voice of a man. My doctor... And I knew he was talking about my heart which I felt waking up from a deep slumber. The more my heart began to beat again, the more unconscious I became. I was tired and wanted to sleep. When I awoke, I could open my eyes. The whole room was bathed in light. Also, I noticed that I was not alone. Next to my bed there was the smiling figure of my doctor.

"Good morning, sir!"The doctor was smiling.
"How are you feeling today?"

I smiled mockingly.

"I am in a hospital, doc, not in a luxurious resort, but I'll survive."

"I am glad to hear it. In two weeks time, you'll be all recovered. You may rest in peace, since nobody has alerted the media, and thus no one knows about the accident you have suffered. Still, I can't help wondering what you were doing all alone in the mountains, without any camping tools. Certainly, you must have had your motives."

I didn't say anything. I didn't thank him either for saving my life. That was his job. But I thanked him for not questioning me more. He was now busy filling in a hospital file.

"Why are you writing about my condition? Can't you just keep me under your surveillance?"

The doctor smiled.

"Of course, but then I am merely a human. I may forget a symptom or two, and this helps me remember."

"Why do you want to remember my symptom?"

"To heal you better."

I ruminated over the idea. Would it be possible to heal your soul through memories? Let's say that something is missing in your life, and you can't go back in time to experience again that moment, but you can write your memories and feel your past forming before your eyes like a huge puzzle.

"Doctor," I shouted as he was getting ready to leave my room.

"What's the matter?"

"I need you to do me a favour. No one has to know about it."

"What kind of favour?"

"One that will help me to heal better."

Later that day, I was holding a block of paper in my hand, and a pencil in the other hand. I didn't know what to write or what to do with it. But I knew that would be my mirror to the past. With my back on a pillow, lying in bed, I began my manuscript with a dedication. After that, I couldn't stop writing.



'There is one thing that comes obsessively into my mind. Before I fell, I heard the song of a bird. I cannot tell the species, but there is one thing I know for certain. The bird sang like no bird on earth. I wanted to see the bird, to reach the height that hid her from my sight. And then I began to climb the rocks. The song didn't come from among the fir-trees. It resounded from high above. I pierced the clouds, trying to see through the blue celestial sea. I didn't see anything. The more I failed, the more I tried. I felt that if I didn't see the bird, I would have lived

in vain. But as I was busy trying to find her, I got dizzy. All that climbing had exhausted my limbs. And then, the snake darted from the shadow of a rock and mercilessly he bit me. Without being able to hold myself firm, I slipped, and then everything went blank.'

**

"Will you edit my memories?" He asked, and Lalage looked at him with surprise.

The manuscript fell to the ground, as he headed for the door. Lalage knew it was their last meeting on earth, their last encounter as two normal human beings. As she picked up the manuscript, and wanted to throw it in the fire, a bird flew by. Lalage saw her, and the bird saw Lalage. It was the most beautiful blue bird that had ever flown over the mountains. But then she flew away, carrying her song towards unknown horizons. With the last sight of the bird's shadow, Lalage knew she wasn't going to let Uriah Reed alone on his final path.

She went to her table and began to read.

"Quickly, quickly!" She shouted when he was brought to hospital, and when his heart began to beat again, Lalage wept with joy.

"It's almost over now."

It was dark in Lalage's hut, and the fire had quenched. Suddenly, a blue light spread over the horizon, and a song that resembled nothing on earth filled the mountain range. Lalage listened, and ran outside, wanting to see the singing bird. She ran and ran, keeping her face up.

"Aleksandra...Aleksandra..."

The wind was moaning restlessly among the

branches, and she shuddered as she thought she had heard someone calling her name.

She kept running, not looking back, always going further and further.

“Andromeda...Andromeda...”

Her eyes rolled in every direction. There was no one around. She began running faster.

“Aleksandra...Lalage...”

Pressing her hands above the ears, in a useless attempt to block away the sounds, the woman ran. She resembled a prehistoric embodiment of a hunting goddess who had been turned into a prey by the unyielding three Furies of her lost love. She was no longer on earth, flying over her human shadow like a dream of pristine nature. When she stopped, her flight had descended into a rocky valley. There she found the nest of the blue bird. It was floating over a spring, like a boat sailed by eternity. And she saw Uriah Reed’s memories in the wind that kept blowing the bird’s nest down the spring. Then, she knew she would always remember.

The End

